

A RESPONSE TO THE PROBLEM OF THE CINEMA

THE purpose of this article is to give some idea of the way in which Catholics in Belgium are attempting to deal with one of the most influential forces of our time—the Cinema. Under the stimulus and direction of the Dominican Father Felix Morlion, they have evolved a method which is at once intelligent and eminently successful. In England very little has as yet been done; and this brief survey may be of interest to those who realise the importance and urgency of the problem.

The rise of the film to its present status of universal predominance is surely unique in its rapidity. Between 1887 and 1889 Edison invented a toy, the Kinetoscope; you looked through its peephole and saw a series of pictures of somebody who was moving, awkwardly moving, it was true, but moving. The toy became popular; but it had this limitation, only one person could peep at a time. This restriction inevitably provoked the idea of projecting the pictures on to a screen by means of some sort of magic lantern, thus making them visible to a roomful of people. The instrument was made, and the first Vitascope was shown on Broadway in 1895. It met with immediate success: the Cinema, as we know it, had begun.

The screen presentations gradually became more alive and interesting, and in 1903 the first moving-picture-story appeared—*The Great Train Robbery*, by Edwin S. Porter. It was eight hundred feet in length, and its effect was sensational. Showmen opened up exhibition halls, known as Nickelodeons, all over America; and in England between 1903 and 1909 there were the famous Halle's Tours—you entered a glorified railway-carriage and toured the world on the screen—interspersed with the other turns in the

Blackfriars

music hall. The demand increased, studios for actors were formed, and producing companies came into being. Up to 1914 most European countries showed promise of being able to hold their own with America, but the War ruined their chances, and America took the lead and, naturally, exploited it to the full. Films were mass-produced, and poured into Europe in such numbers that the public almost came to identify the Cinema with the American product. What was more, the American companies secured control of chains of theatres—especially in England—and thus made certain that their goods should be seen and those of other countries more or less excluded. Even so, the path was not always smooth; the public began to tire of the eternal sameness of the mass-produced article; stars began to dim; European countries, especially Germany, were showing significant achievements (Russia was isolated, but her film work is of course more important than any); and altogether the industry in America showed signs of a slump. Then came the astounding invention of photographed sound, and with it the dialogue film—the ‘Talkie.’ The situation was saved.

In not much more than thirty years Edison’s toy had thus made a conquest of the world. Throughout America, in every country of Europe, in Russia, in Japan, there are cinemas in almost every town, in almost every village. Millions attend them week by week. Other attractions have paled beside them; the music-hall is manifestly doomed;¹ the theatre cannot compete in popularity. This is the tremendous fact that has to be faced by all who are in any way concerned with the influences that direct and fashion the lives of men.

¹ If, as seems doubtful, the recent success of ‘Non-stop Variety’ is no more than a last convulsion.—ED.

A Response to the Problem of the Cinema

What then is the nature of this all-embracing phenomenon? What does it profess to be? First of all, it is obviously an *industry*; the costs of production, distribution, exhibition, etc., are so great that vast sums of money are necessarily involved. That this may be a menace is easy to see: those who are only concerned with box-office returns bother about one standard of value—commercial success—and leave all others to take care of themselves. Secondly, the film is an *entertainment*, a relaxation, a recreation. In every age the masses have sought some refuge from the humdrum weariness of everyday life and work, some happy world of fantasy where they can see their desires fulfilled and live imaginatively without any of the obstructions that concrete reality brings. And it is some such world of fantasy that the screen affords—cheaply, conveniently and with a satisfying duration. Its attraction as an entertainment, with sound and spectacle combined, is incomparable. Then the film is an *art*. There can be no doubt that it offers one of the most powerful means of expression to the creative artist of to-day. And those who have seen the work of such directors as Eisenstein or Pudovkin, Pabst or Clair, must agree that they are very great artists indeed. The merely material realities photographed by the camera are taken by them as the elements upon which they impose a new rhythm and a new life, and which they fashion into an organic whole. Finally, the film is *propaganda*—with its double appeal of sound and sight the most effective propaganda the world has known. Every film contains propaganda for something, even if only for elaborate bathrooms or fashions in dress. Every aspect of American life, for example, has been shown on the screen; its natural scenery, its navy and army, its police force, its architecture, its press, its law courts. But Soviet Russia was the first to organise the new medium consciously for this purpose, and it

Blackfriars

has been, and is, one of the main instruments in the establishment of its regime. And incidentally, this reminds one of the great part that the film seems destined to play as a revolutionary method of education in general.

Now this great Industry, Entertainment, Art, Propaganda, has grown up, on the whole, outside specifically Catholic and Christian influence. And this is the fact that makes it a problem of peculiar urgency. The film has its definite and permanent place in our civilization: it has come to stay; it is very young in development, and its future incalculable. Thousands upon thousands of our people frequent the cinemas. They cannot but be affected by the film's irresistible appeal, and affected in fundamental matters that concern their whole outlook on life. This is a grave situation; especially, as we have seen, because in the hands of unscrupulous commercialists or venomous propagandists this thing may easily become the means of disseminating the most corrupt and subversive ideas, insidious because never stated directly, but presented attractively *in action* to the eyes and heightened emotionally by sound. Fortunately to-day most films are not animated by any such deadly purpose, but very many do present a cheapened version of life and of its solemn phases, and offer as ideals the activities of persons whose characters are incompletely developed in one way or over-developed in another.

What is to be done about it? What remedy can we apply? Some would answer by advising abstention. They say, 'Keep away! Have nothing to do with it.' But this, apart from being thoroughly impracticable on any large scale, is a refusal to see the immense potentialities for good which the film, in all its above-mentioned aspects, offers, and a neglect of the abundant evidence of its many excellent and admirable achievements already attained. Others believe in de-

A Response to the Problem of the Cinema

nunciation and scourge the Cinema and all its works. Their efforts, however, seem to have little effect either on the film-producers or on those whom they would protect. There is, in fact, a sounder method than either of these. It is that of Fr. Morlion and his co-operators : it consists in the *Formation of Public Opinion by means of the Press*. At present the public is largely at the mercy of the advertisements and film-noticees, with their meaningless superlatives. They have no means of knowing before they enter the cinema what the value of the performance is likely to be, from either an artistic or moral point of view. They have to take what they get. It is, therefore, vitally necessary that they should be enlightened ; and the potent instrument at hand is manifestly the Press. The formation of a critical habit of mind is the outcome of a gradual process, but it can be done : *it is being done*. In this way, in time, a public must be created—and it is the money of the public which ultimately controls cinema production—that will demand and obtain films that come up to a certain standard of perfection. This will be of profit, not only to morality, but to the Cinema itself, for the commercial domination of the film is, to say the least, a hindrance to the perfecting of film-technique and art.

Such are the *ideas* which animate the movement as they have been outlined by Fr. Morlion. The grip on realities which inspires them is itself a guarantee of their practicableness. And in point of fact they have already been put into execution with remarkable success. For some time there has existed at Brussels a *Catholic Film Centre*, whose chief function has been to control and distribute the films to be shown in the numerous Catholic cinemas of the country. Out of this has grown quite recently the Catholic Film Press Bureau, called *DOCIP (DOcumentatie der CINematografische Pers)*, of which Fr. Morlion is Director.

Blackfriars

On July 20th of the present year was held the first Congress of the Film Centre at Brussels. The Abbé Cartuyfels, President of the parent organisation, outlined the general aims of the Centre: to give to the public good, or at least innocuous, films by means of distribution, censorship, renting, exhibition and eventually, it is hoped, production. Fr. Morlion followed with a statement of the particular aims of his Press Bureau. His speech is worth quoting:

At the beginning of this year we founded at Brussels, in connection with the Catholic Film Centre, a Cinematographic Press Service with the name of DOCIP. Guided by the verdicts of the Catholic censorships already existing in Germany, Holland, France, and Austria, we began by classifying films according to definite principles under the three chief headings of Aesthetic-value, Entertainment-value, and Moral-value.² Henceforward, we shall have our own duly qualified 'censors,' who will classify all the new films which come into the country, as well as many of the older ones. In addition to this, we collect and classify, from books and periodicals, the material required by Catholic writers and journalists on topics concerning their work connected with the film. In the DOCIP study-circles at Brussels and Antwerp—at the beginning of the university terms we shall start similar study-circles

² It should be explained that these 'censorships' aim at something more constructive and positive than do the activities of such an institution as the British Board of Film Censors. Their primary function is to classify films according to the audiences for which they are suitable, and this not only from the moral point of view, but from those of intellectual and popular appeal. It is instructive to note the chief categories under which films are classified by DOCIP: I, *Les films classiques* (films of real artistic merit); II, *Les films sérieux* (films which combine a treatment of the graver aspects of life with some technical excellence); III, *Les films d'agrément* (entertaining films which tax but little the intelligence of the beholder); IV, *Varias* ('interest' films, etc.) These categories are subdivided according to the audiences to which they should appeal—*pour tous*; *pour adultes*; *pour personnes formées* (i.e., critical); *pour intellectuels*. It is a rule never to give gratuitous advertisement to immoral or salacious films by announcing them to be such.

A Response to the Problem of the Cinema

at Louvain and Ghent—we hope to form the critics whose writings will seek to make more widespread a critical attitude towards the Cinema. Already DOCIP contributes the articles and notices for the film-columns of seven journals, and at the end of September we hope to be able to undertake to supply several more. At the same time we shall commence to issue a *Press Bulletin*, which, besides general articles and information, will give a detailed criticism of the new films that come into the country. Such criticisms, dealing severally with the artistic, entertainment and moral aspects of the films under review, will serve in the first place as material for consultation by newspapers which seek to give guidance concerning the films being exhibited in the districts in which they circulate. It is psychologically certain that the Catholic public, which attends the cinemas anyway, but which at present allows its choice to be guided by commercial advertisement or to the cinema in the nearest street, will gladly welcome intelligent and informed guidance to the programmes of real artistic or entertainment merit and which, moreover, offer no moral danger. For this reason we are offering our *Press Bulletin* at the reduced rate of 25 francs a year to priests, cinema managers and heads of families who would appreciate such alphabetically arranged information on current films.³

It will be seen from Fr. Morlion's speech that the Belgian enterprise is not an isolated one. Indeed, the movement is rapidly developing into an international organisation. If we have quoted the Belgian example it is only because it is the one with which we are best acquainted, and which, as an effort of Dominican organisers, is particularly likely to interest the readers of BLACKFRIARS. But it is the Dominicans again who are in charge of the older kindred organisation in Holland, of whose publication *Medeelingen* the Belgian *Press Bulletin* is to be a counterpart. In Germany, thanks to the zeal of Fr. Muckermann, S.J., and his nephew, Herr Richard Muckermann, the same work has been carried on with great effect for more than nine years. The *Muckermann Korrespondenz-Büro*

³ Quoted in *De Standaard*, July 31st, 1932.

Blackfriars

began by contributing articles and criticisms for three journals; to-day it supplies more than a hundred. Its own periodical, *Filmrundschau*, prints detailed information on all the films released month by month in the Reich. That its judgements are of value, not only to the pastor of souls and the guardian of morals, but to the Cinema itself, is shown by the fact that in a general referendum held in Germany to discover the most reliable source of film criticism and information in the country, both the journal *Lichtbildbühne* and the Ufa Film Company voted for the *Filmrundschau*.

In France a powerful Catholic influence is at work in the Cinema, thanks to the tireless and versatile efforts of Chanoine Reymond. Himself an enthusiast for the Cinema, he has not only organised agencies for the distribution of films, but has given his personal aid to the production of several. To his inspiration are due the periodicals *Dossiers du cinéma*, which has existed for several years as a valuable source of information and criticism, and *Choisir*, which monthly supplies guidance regarding the films showing in the cinemas of Greater Paris.

We can but mention the existence of similar enterprises in Austria, Italy, Spain and Brazil. A vigorous effort is now being made, not only to establish these bureaux in all other countries, but to co-ordinate their efforts by bringing uniformity into their methods of censorship and classification. A system is being devised by which uniform card-indexes will exist in all the capitals of the world, thus facilitating co-operation between the various national organisations. By such means it is hoped to establish a powerful organisation, as international as Catholicism itself, for the betterment of the Cinema, and so for the good of souls and the glory of God.

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