

# Heard and Seen : Critic in the Cinema

by Maryvonne Butcher

Today the conflict in critical opinion over controversial films often seems more pronounced when it comes to the kind of film that is most likely to engage the interest of Catholics. Never has it been more important that the intelligent Catholic should make up his own mind over a difficult picture than in the present state of the cinema ; and by and large there is not, in this country, a great deal that will help him enlarge his cinematic critical apparatus. In France, Belgium or Italy the highbrow Catholic is not ashamed to admit to enthusiasm for the cinema : in England one only too often finds him saying that he cannot be bothered with films. This puts us at a considerable disadvantage when it comes to international gatherings concerned with any form of mass media and, worse still, at a visible loss when it comes to discussion with alert non-Catholic cinema-goers in this country about any particular film on which we should certainly have clear views one way or another.

The eighth London Film Festival held last autumn provided a pertinent case in point. Owing to the massive rebuilding that is still taking place on the South Bank, the films this year were shown in the West End ; in consequence a much larger proportion of the general public (as opposed to members of the British Film Institute) came to the performances. Three of the films shown were OCIC (Office Catholique Internationale du Cinéma) prize winners – one of them the Grand Prix for 1964 – and several others were of lively interest to Catholic audiences. How many, I wonder, would really be able to explain why the Japanese film *She and He* won the OCIC prize at Berlin ; or why Jacques Demy's *Les Parapluies de Cherbourg* – dismissed by one national critic as a 'pop opera' – was given a prize at Cannes ? Neither of these pictures, on the face of it, was at all an obvious choice for a prize awarded by a confessional jury and yet each, on examination, falls logically within the terms of reference of the prize which, it should be noted, demands both technical standards and a positive demonstration of both spiritual and human values.

It would seem, therefore, that an independent judgment of films is something that every Catholic parent or teacher who goes to the cinema at all must be able to arrive at ; if only because it is the young, for whom parents and teachers have to bear some responsibility, however nominal, who are today by far the most important section of the film-going public : because they are at once the most enthusiastic and the best informed.

The thing is not difficult. The do-it-yourself-critic's kit does not demand a knowledge of the *Poetics*, though this would do no harm; one does not even need to have been brought up on Dilys Powell or Henri Agel, though this would certainly be a help. It is, it appears to me, simply necessary to like films; to find in the cinema what the intelligent young audience recognizes, that it is the only creative medium that can really be called an art-form which is at the same time strictly contemporaneous with the age in which we live. The cinema has grown up with the twentieth century and it mirrors more faithfully the preoccupations of the time than anything else.

You like films, then, you are enthusiastic about new movements and good westerns and well-made thrillers. So you put your mind to a new Hitchcock or a new John Ford, the latest Antonioni or Bergman with at least as much application as you would bring to a new Graham Greene novel or current autobiography. And this means that you will teach yourself to judge a film as a film, and will not be seduced into denouncing it for having no message or the wrong one – a characteristic of many critics, Catholic or not. The way the film communicates to you through moving images upon a screen is what the spectator has first to assess, because this is what is going to determine the success of the film in itself. How many times have we seen a picture made with the best of intentions, striving to promote causes or ideas with which we are in the warmest sympathy, which yet is so technically inept that the cause is damaged rather than advanced.

The formation of the most vestigial Catholic helps him to make a reasonable shot at judging the moral content of a film, but I am persuaded that a parent or teacher will do far more harm than good if he discusses an ambiguous film with a teenager on the basis of the subject alone. You must try to acquire an observant eye for the basic elements that go to make a good film. It is no good discussing, say, *The Girl with Green Eyes*, exclusively on the facts of the heroine's behaviour – though it certainly must be judged – unless you can at least recognize the inventive direction of Desmond Davies or the importance of the camera-work and its counterpoint with the dialogue. So many of the young directors today – and the cinema is essentially an art-form that attracts the young – are trying to convey what they think is good or bad about the contemporary scene, that they are almost bound to make films about difficult or hazardous subjects. If they are honestly telling the truth as they see it, then the least that any spectator can do is to look at what they are trying to do, and not condemn them arbitrarily for something they had never even visualized.

Let us therefore imagine the average enthusiastic observant Catholic film-goer – *o si sic omnes!* – setting off for what, in my opinion, was probably the most important film shown during this last London film

festival. It was screened first to the press and then, once only and that at the highly inconvenient time of 11 o'clock on Sunday morning, at the Odeon, Leicester Square – which was full. *The Gospel according to St Matthew* was made by Pier Paolo Pasolini, an Italian director who makes no secret of his Marxism; it had won not only the OCIC Prize at Venice, but a week or so later was awarded the Grand Prix for the year. The London press show had been at the beginning of the week, so that a good many reviews had come out in time to be read before seeing the film. The conflict of opinion was, in some cases, total; the critics of the *Guardian* and the *Observer*, for instance, did not seem to have seen the same film. Here, surely, was a case in which the Catholic with enough concern to betake himself to the film at all was under a real obligation to make up his mind, for himself, why a picture of such controversial potential made by a man who might presumably be hostile to the subject, should have been crowned in so unmistakable a fashion by the official Catholic body.

Armed with his knowledge of the gospel (it was in Italian without subtitles), some familiarity with Italian Catholicism, some idea of Marxist feeling about the under-privileged and an open mind he would, one hopes, have been able to appreciate the tremendous qualities of this film. He would try to estimate whether its occasional failures were due to technique, ideology or misapprehension; he would recognize the rare beauty of the opening sequence, where Joseph painfully comes to terms with his situation, agree that the admirable representation of the Last Supper showed how the sacrament flowered directly from the meal. He would weigh up his feelings about the treatment of the character of Christ as a young man driven by his knowledge that he had only three years in which to change the world with the most inadequate of followers, and decide whether the images which the director had employed were as valid for him as they might be for others. Discussion of this film will go on for a long time, and if it ever achieves a wider showing, as we must hope, then it will flare up again. Catholics are in an unrivalled position to estimate its value, and I feel that this is a classic example of the necessity for each spectator to decide which side he is going to take over what is at the lowest rating a profoundly significant piece of cinema. The do-it-yourself critic's kit should be perfectly adequate to the task.

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