

"Cinematography", Ciné-Journal, 20 April - 11 May, 1912 Yhcam

IN THE BEGINNING, cinematography constituted no more than a scientific curiosity, a sort of photographic "Praxinoscope"; but it rapidly set out on a double path of evolution.

On the one hand, men of science had a presentiment of its importance for kinetic studies and scientific documentation; on the other, the *showmen for children* foresaw the possibility of widespread commercial exploitation and remuneration.

We have to remember that it was the fair vendors who launched the cinema as an amusement speciality; it's on the fairgrounds that the mass public began to take a fancy to this delight for the eyes, which suddenly took off on such an extraordinary development.

The masses flocked to and appreciated the cinema-theater well before society people and the artistic and intellectual elite; still, it's fair to say that, because of technical imperfections, the first films were rather disheartening.

It was only later, after the strenuous labour of inventors and design engineers, that we could catch a glimpse of the artistic future of cinematography.

Leaving aside the technical aspect of cinematography as much as possible, we are going to pursue the study of films from several different points of view.

At the outset, we will establish a general classification system, set up as a base from which to derive the desiderata we need.

First class - the cinema considered from the theatrical point of view.

- A. For children.
- B. For adolescents and their parents.
- C. For adults only.
- D. For artistic and intellectual study.

Second class - the cinema considered as an instrument of intellectual development.

- A. Pre-school.
- B. Primary school studies.
- C. Secondary school studies.
- D. University studies.
- E. Scientific documentation.

Third class – the cinema as employed for the propagation of feelings and ideas.

- A. Moral sentiments.
- B. Religious sentiments.
- C. Political ideas.
- D. Patriotic sentiments.

Fourth class – the cinema considered as a mode of information and publicity.

- A. The newsreel.
- B. Advertising film.

[...]

First principle: the cinema program must correlate with the public to which it is addressed.

[...]

The cinema spectacle can achieve an extraordinary artistic development, but it seems that only its adversaries have really understood this.

The recent Commission report of the third Congress on Cinematography [12 May, 1911] would restrict the cinema's role and future by counseling authors to write scenarios for children to the exclusion of all others.

The cinema-theater is perfectly capable of interesting and captivating adults as well as children; we must disabuse the public of the idea that the cinema is only a spectacle for children, a sort of perfected puppet show.

The cinema-theaters should be divided into two perfectly distinct kinds: on the one hand, spectacles for children, written especially for them and offering all the guarantees of requisite morality; on the other, spectacles for adults, spectacles in which the author retains his freedom completely and takes on the theater itself as a rival.

Actually, a good number of scenarios are neither fish nor fowl; they almost always go beyond the intelligence of children but without reaching a point which would interest adults.

To summarize, films should be categorized into three series.

1st series – for children and adolescents.

2nd series – a "mixed" series capable of interesting adults while containing nothing which might tarnish the purity of children.

3rd series – for adults, where children and adolescents cannot be admitted.

The first months of 1912 have seen the apogee of cinema-theater, I believe; now we are going to witness a period of decline, because scenarios have not advanced and merely repeat themselves with all their faults. The mass public is growing bored, and the halls little by little will become empty. To

maintain its position and augment its public, the cinema-theater has to evolve; and the managers of theaters and café-concerts are making their performers go all out in an effort to curb that evolution.

The cinema spectacle is not a pale imitation of the theater; it is a separate spectacle which corresponds to a new and very real ART, a special art which should be left to its own devices, with its own special authors and actors.

Something as astonishing as this new art could appear, for the cinema spectacle can create impressions infinitely more vivid than the theatre can, even though the characters are no more than mute shadows; and this is because the system of conventional gestures disappears to be replaced by an improbable realism.

The dimness of the hall constitutes an important factor which, through the state of contemplation it produces, contributes much more than one might think to the impression created; the spectator's attention is caught and concentrated on the luminous projection, without there being any possible distraction.

The effect produced by the characters' silence is one of the most fascinating aspects of the cinema-theater. The spectator *does not perceive that the character is mute* for, through a particular form of psychism, through an auditory allusion, he senses the sentence that *he himself* puts in the mouth of the character. The spectator in some way hears himself speak, and the impression is all the stronger because he himself imagines the sentences of silent dialogue.

There is no popular spectacle in which the imagination of the spectator plays a greater role than in the cinema-theater.

ART in the cinema-theater is an art of suggesting dreams; so nothing must startle the spectator or else the dream disappears.

However, the *noises of life* are necessary, for the spectator cannot supply them through imagination, as he can for the dialogue.

When a gunshot goes off without a propman reproducing the noise, the dream ceases abruptly, for the spectator is awakened by the improbability of a silent gunshot; it's the same with a plate which falls and breaks in a deep silence.

Each of us has paid attention to the suggestive influence of murmuring waves in films of the seashore; in sum, the "noises of life" are necessary to the perfection of the spectacle.

As for musical accompaniment, while we await specialized scores, its only possible condition is to be *neutral*. That is extremely valuable - one could even say indispensable - for it prevents us from realizing that muteness of the characters. When, by contrast, instead of being neutral, it asserts itself blatantly in a way opposite the subject of the film, it's abominable.

I have seen a young girl lull her dying mother to sleep by playing a harp (silently, of course), while the orchestra played "Sword of my father" from the *Grande Duchesse* with a diabolical brio.

The orchestra should drop the potpourri of operettas and operas, quadrilles, boisterous marches, and café-concert refrains in order to take up the neutral symphonic genre, which is to the advantage of the manager, besides, since nearly all of this music long ago fell into the public domain.

"Come to me, darling!" doesn't suit the death of Isolde any more than a funeral march suits the amusing fantasies of Prince Rigadin.

II. On the scenario and cinema artists.

Here is the current method of concocting cinema scenarios.

The Production Company receives ideas for scenarios from any number of people.

A reading committee (?) examines these ideas and selects a certain number of them; the selected ideas are turned over to the directors.

The director constructs a scenario from the selected idea, and he has full discretion to modify the selected idea to his liking, even changing it completely.

The director then explains the scenario to his actors and proceeds immediately to the shooting.

The author of the selected idea receives several francs in payment for it.

In short, there is only one author, properly speaking, and that author is none other than the director.

In these conditions, the usual feebleness of the scenario is hardly astonishing.

From the beginning, the film production companies have been terrified of authors or, more precisely, of authors' rights.

The situation in which salaried authors handle their own *mise-en-scène* is something the companies have found comfortable and advantageous. On the one hand, it's only fair to point out that, given a poor set of ideas, certain directors have done wonders and produced remarkable results. Yet the average film has remained quite trifling, and the crisis undermining the cinema-theater has no other cause than the company executive's misconceptions regarding exactly how to organize the composition of scenarios.

On the other hand, the authors of plays, novels, and short stories have come forward to claim authors' rights for the films in which the scenario idea was taken from their works. Concluding that the companies did not want to bargain with them, they have taken to composing adaptations of their works themselves.

The results have not been definitive, nor can they be.

First of all, the best theatrical plays never make anything but bad films; one shouldn't ask more of the cinema than what it can give, and especially something which it cannot.

For instance, as a result of its connections, S.C.A.G.L. found itself appealing to stars, famous actors and actresses, which seduced it into paying

enormous fees for unremarkable results – for the conventional performance of actors comes off badly in the cinema. With the exception of actors such as Prince, Polaire, or Mistinguett, it's far better to appeal to artists who are making a career for themselves from cinema performances.

The cinema and the theater are two different things. On the one hand, the libretti for the cinema must be specially composed all of a piece and in a fashion very different from those destined for the theater. On the other – and I know I am repeating myself – the conventional performance of theater actors becomes perfectly ridiculous when reproduced by the cinema.

The cinema-theater ought to have special authors, special directors, and special troupes of cinema actors.

The cinema-theater has to assert itself as a new ART, with its own original methods, and it should be furious at being considered as a simple reproducer of what is properly called the theater.

Authors' rights should be based on the number of meters of positive prints produced because, under the current conditions of cinema-theaters, an advance against receipts would be unthinkable. Under this recommended system, the author's rightful shares would comprise a proportion of the price of the positive print; he would be paid by the distribution company after the sale of the film.

[...]

III. THE CLOSE SHOT

Pantomime and ciné-theater have the muteness of actors in common; but in pantomime the actors' performance is conventional and exaggerated, while in the ciné-theater, it has to be natural and understated.

To fulfill its destiny, the ciné-theater should represent life as it is lived, while pantomime has never sought to represent more than an artificial, imitative life.

The troupe of actors at Vitagraph was the first to recognize and apply this principle, and the undeniable and undisputed success of this famous company owes largely to that.

In order to produce the maximum effect, while practising a restraint which thwarts broad gestures, the Vitagraph actors have had to work especially on the play of facial features; and in order that their facial expressions could be seen clearly by the spectators (in all corners of the hall), the director has had to project the actors in close shots as often as possible.

This method, which gives good results, has quickly degenerated into an excessive practice, as the enthusiasts who have followed the Vitagraph films for the past two years will easily recognize.

Naturally, little by little, this misuse has been pursued conscientiously by the directors of other companies.

Now we have reached what could be called *the age of the legless cripple*. For three-quarters of the time, the actors in a scene are projected in close shot, cut off at the knees; from the artistic point of view, the effect produced is highly disagreeable and shocking.

In the theater, the play of facial features can be seen only through opera glasses; in the cinema, the use of opera glasses has the flaw of emphasizing the cinematic imperfections of the image. Therefore, we must find a way to replace the magnification produced by a projection in close shot.

Here the directors find themselves faced with an almost insurmountable dilemma - on the one hand, the play of the actors' facial features is not perceived satisfactorily; on the other, as a result of magnification, the legs of the actor vanish from the screen.

These past few days, I have seen a film where an actor and a horse, placed side by side, were both practically cut off at the knees; then when the man mounted the horse, he found himself suddenly decapitated. To pass instantaneously from being legless to being headless is really pushing things a bit far.

The second inconvenience resulting from the misuse of the close shot is, in the eye of the spectator, to produce the impression of characters of an unnatural grandeur. And when the aggrandizement diminishes and they return to normal, the same characters seem too small; the eye takes a certain time to get used to this.

Turning to another matter, certainly from an economic point of view there is an interest in renting to the large cinemas which can hold a great number of spectators because, except for rental costs, the general expenses remain appreciably the same for a small or large cinema, so the receipts can be doubled.

In the final analysis, given the continual increase in cinema enthusiasts, the screen has become much too small; it no longer corresponds to the grandeur of the new cinemas. Screen size no longer correlates with the actual needs of the ciné-theater industry. Fortunately, an increase in the dimensions of the film negative does not offer insurmountable difficulties. I believe that the future of the ciné-theater is in no way compromised, on the contrary. When the screen reaches huge dimensions, for example, 24 × 18 meters, the spectacle offered will become so beautiful and produce such powerful effects that there will be a new upsurge in attendance. And the big cinemas of the future will again become too small for the increased number of enthusiasts.

[...]

In documentary films, the director should always begin by projecting the subject with a clear reference point, for example, a dog with a man.

If, later, he wants to increase the size of one or the other, in order to better

capture details, he should announce to the audience that the subject is being projected in an enlargement of 2, 3 or 4 times.

It is the same for flowers, plants, small animals, and, ultimately, all the subjects of natural history and anatomy.

On big screens, the characters should be projected with an average magnification so that the play of facial features is clearly perceived by those farthest back in the hall – for we should take into account the fact that, in the cinema, the seats farthest back are the most expensive.

Exaggerated magnifications should be used only in special cases and with the greatest discretion.

In order for the ciné-theater to assume the place which is its due within ART, the director should attach great importance to the composition of the tableaux. It is more than likely that sooner or later the collaboration of a painter will become indispensable, especially when the three-color film process will have achieved the requisite improvements, which cannot be delayed much longer.

From the point of view of composition, what is most striking is the lack of air or space which results from the accumulation of a mass of overly large characters on an overly small screen.

The actors cannot circulate; they obscure one another. When the scene represents a room, we never see more than a part of it. When it is a question of representing a person in a bed, the bed often occupies a grotesque position and takes up all of the room.

When it is a question of a salon or reception rooms, the director is obliged to project in depth; and the spectator sees no more than a corridor whose width in close shot corresponds at most to the space necessary for three or four characters.

Given the actual dimensions of the screen and the requirements for magnification, directors find themselves, I repeat, faced with insurmountable difficulties; and the results they do achieve, in such poor conditions, deserve all our praise.

[...]

IV. Scripts and scenarios, general conditions

At the present time, a film is exhibited in the same cinema for seven days at the most, and often only for three. Then it is shelved, and we don't see it any more – its life is finished; it is permanently buried and forgotten.

This ephemeral life of film is discouraging for authors. Why seek to achieve a work of art, why endeavor to create what might be considered a masterpiece in this form if, after seven days of exhibition, the work has to disappear?

It is safe to say that the scenarios which inundate us, with a few exceptions, are not worth even seven days of exhibition. But doesn't the low

value of the films result precisely from the fact that they are not made to last and that they have, I repeat, only an ephemeral life?

Why could not the very best films, those which possess a genuine, intrinsic value, come to form a *Repertory*, a repertory which would stay [in distribution] and could be rerun?

Why could not those scripts which are in a class by themselves be published with their *mise-en-scène*, exactly like theater playscripts, and come to constitute a *Library of Cinema-Theater*?

Until now, the Press has disdained to publish criticism of exhibited films, yet in Brussels, for example, there are many more people who go to the cinema than go to the theater.

On Sundays, a hundred thousand people pass into the cinemas while ten thousand go to the theater.

Why this disdain on the part of the press?

Almost everywhere the Press works against the cinemas. It consents to their being some advertising on a quarter page because that is a commercial enterprise; but in the body of the paper it is either scornful silence or the virulent and undeserving attack.

[...]

The Ciné-Theater is in fashion as a topic of conversation. This being indisputable, it follows that the first newspaper which establishes a "Cinema" column, in order to give its readers all kinds of information on their favourite subject, won't fail to see its printing run jump dramatically.

It is a little ridiculous to see the newspapers, which often carry stories and serials that would make a policeman blush, pretending to be "prudish", taxing the cinema-theaters for immorality, and preaching abstention.

But despite the vain efforts of a press which is far too self-satisfied for its friends, the "Cinématophobes", the Cinema has become one of our customs, the habit has caught on, and the press campaigns are devoted to a lost cause.

In the composition of scripts for the cinema, first of all, the author finds himself faced with a very tough problem for, if his characters can *act*, they cannot *reason*, and it is only through their manner of acting that they can convey what is going on in their minds.

The author does have the resource of projecting explanations [expository intertitles], but these explanations break up the spectacle and produce a bad effect - they are anti-artistic. The best thing would be to reach the point of being able to compose a completely intelligible film without any need for expository texts.

We could envision a method which would constitute a theatrical art that is both original and interesting; this would involve projecting the characters and, simultaneously, their states of mind.

This method would be strongly analogous to the ultra-modern painting of the *futurists* who sought to paint not only a character but also what is happening in his mind. If the initiative attempted by the futurists only ended in ridicule, an effort of this kind initiated in the cinema, on the contrary, would give results altogether more interesting.

In the ciné-theater, this method is currently practiced when there is a dream or hallucination. In order to achieve a moral effect as "the final word" in his film, *L'Auto Grise* [1912], [Victorin Jasset] projects the hallucination of one of the bandits who sees his own head fall under the blade of the guillotine. This method could be generalized by applying it to the waking state.

The Wagnerian opera employs the same tendency when the orchestra endeavors to reproduce musically the feelings which are stirring in the characters on stage.

In sum, theatrical art has always sought to dissect the psychic states of its characters and, in some fashion, make them manifest for the spectators.

For example, "La Tempête sous un crâne", that marvellous chapter in the famous Victor Hugo novel [*Les Misérables*], is perfectly possible to render cinematically, by the following method.

Jean Valjean, in the guise of M. Madeleine, would appear alone on the screen, in the foreground or middle ground, while all the thoughts succeeding one another in his mind would be projected in the background – that is, *made material by means of the cinematic image*. Naturally, the gestures and facial expressions of the actors would remain in perfect synchronization with the projected image.

The author could vary the intensity of the thinking through the focus – the clarity of the image corresponding to the clarity of the thought, and vague thoughts corresponding to soft images produced by a lack of focus. He could vary the intensity of the light and leave the images of dark thoughts in shadow.

This example may raise the possibility of a new theatrical art in the future which can only be achieved through the cinema.

[...]

The major dramatic authors, accustomed to and spoiled by the great success of their plays, have been stunned at how little effect the same plays produce in the cinema, so they have taken the cinema as a holy terror.

It is precisely because they know their craft so marvellously well that dramatic authors achieve such miserable results in the cinema.

First of all, the dramatic author is subject to a limited number of acts and scenes in the theater, while the cinema triumphs through the boundless multiplicity of different images.

Furthermore, in the theater the first act always serves to establish the

play and uncover the basis of the plot; in the cinema this exposition is utterly impossible.

In the theater, the character can tell us that he has just completed a voyage during which a series of incidents happened to him of capital importance to the plot.

In the cinema, this kind of story-telling is impossible. The character must complete the voyage *before the eyes* of the spectator, and all the events which occur have to be *seen* by the spectator.

In the theater, the monologue is the current rage; in the cinema a silent monologue would be the height of ridicule.

The cinema spectators must *see* a sequence of actions which constitute the drama, nothing should remain unclear. Also, the methods of construction in the cinema are completely different from those appropriate to the theater.

Before tackling the cinema script, the dramatic author ought to undergo a new apprenticeship; but having reached the age of celebrity, that is something he rejects out of hand.

In the cinema, there are no "[verbal] effects for the public". These effects are replaced by tableaux; and to execute them in good form, one has to know the rules of composition, which are precisely those of good painting.

A good author of cinema scripts is far from being a "somebody". If it is true that it's useless for him to speak beautifully, he nevertheless has to conquer enormous difficulties to put on a purely cinematic drama.

But, and herein lies his power, the scriptwriter of the Cinema solves the problem of the diversity of languages. For him there is no need of either *volapuc* or *esperanto*. His drama is understood everywhere and by everyone, by the Chinese as well as the Parisians, by the Spanish as well as the English, by the Russians as well as the Arabs. His field of action has no boundaries; he writes for the Universality of peoples. And we must be audacious enough to say that the dramatic art of the cinema is the greatest of the arts and it has a great future as long as it little by little escapes the languages in which it is still enmeshed.

In its 27 April issue, *Ciné-Journal* offered an extract from the fascinating inquiry run by *Les Marges* on the increasing aesthetic interest in the cinema. Yet, as a result of a natural prejudice, the editor addressed himself only to authors in order to resolve a question which is purely sociological. Consequently, all the responses were beside the point.

A sociologist would have begun by answering that it was not aesthetic interest in the theater but the average level of wealth which had increased.

In our era, people go to spectacles more often because they have more money to spend on their leisure. This is not an evolution of taste but an evolution of wealth.

Statistics show us that, in all periods and countries, the taste for spectacles varies solely according to the level of wealth and the price of

tickets. If the cinema-theater has suddenly achieved such a considerable development, it is solely due to the lowering of ticket prices.

The Cinema has allowed a huge number of people to satisfy their taste for the theater, a taste which they already had, but which the meagerness of their means did not allow them to satisfy.

Specifically, a person who could only go to the theater once on five francs can frequent the cinema five times, for the price of tickets is about five times less expensive. Such is the reason, perhaps the sole reason, why the theaters are being abandoned in favor of the cinema.

Before going to a spectacle, a man looks in his wallet; the size or weight of its contents then determines the choice of spectacles.

Offer anyone the choice of a free ticket to the Opéra, the Comédie-Française, the café-concert, or the cinema, and that person will choose the Opéra or the Comédie-Française everytime, because then taste alone determines the choice. If the same person has to pay for his ticket, the question of how much money he has becomes uppermost.