

Cinema is the theater of the little man! We have heard this said quite a bit lately, but it has never looked less true than it does now. The impressive advances in cinematography result not only from the technical improvement of the invention itself but also from the artistic improvement of the films' subjects. At the same time, the cinemagoers' tastes and sensibilities have matured as well. Gone are the days when people would watch a 1,000-meter-long program of practically anything as long as it was flickering onscreen in front of them. Nowadays, people have become more critical. They have learned how to see.

We hear of new movie theaters being opened every single week. And each new establishment aims to be more elegant than anything the public has seen before.

In the old days, you just rented a space, bought a screen, some old chairs, and the necessary device. Once the screen was hanging, you were open for business.

Today the first question when opening a new movie theater is what stylistic effect you hope to achieve and which architect should lead the renovation project.

It used to be that the bricklayer would come to tear down some plaster walls, the painter would touch up the lower half, and the paperhanger would take care of the top.

Now craftsmen need to be brought in. This is not a job for a simple painter anymore, but for an artist. The wallpaper is gone, and the orchestration has also played its last note. Everything has become classier and more modern, elegant, comfortable, stylish, and artistic.

There is also a greater tendency today, wherever space permits, to provide a cloakroom so that visitors are no longer forced to accommodate their heavy outer garments in their seats as they enjoy the program. Without even really noticing, we are moving ever closer to the way things are done in the theater.

This transformation should be welcomed. We all gain from the cinema's metamorphosis from caterpillar to magnificent butterfly, from its newfound ability to truly assert the value of the motion-picture theater.

This metamorphosis of the movie theater has been so profound that it has begun to affect the public too. The cloakroom in one large Berlin movie theater that opened some

time ago was initially met with a good deal of skepticism by the public. It took time for people to get used to the idea that they should hand over their coats at the movie theater as well. Now the idea is so ingrained that the obligation to check coats is accepted in better movie theaters without a second thought.

The more elegant, genteel, and modern a movie theater is today, the more the public begins to hold itself to the same standards. Several days ago the *Berliner Tageblatt*, for example, published a column well worth reading, under the title "The Cinematograph in Evening Dress." The movie theater has not just become a veritable theater, it has become feudal and aristocratic, more papal than even the pope. The refined nature of today's public and the accompanying expectations have grown so exponentially that we can scarcely keep up! Just like the movie theater, the public has metamorphosed as well.

It is time to replace those brutal and eccentric films that are meant to be funny with sensitive, atmospheric paintings. Artistic drama is pushing aside maudlin family trash. Tinted films must abandon their loud and garish tones and be composed in gentler hues. There is demand now for regular pauses during the program to give viewers a chance to collect themselves; an actual overture and music between acts are also desirable. Movie theaters ought to have a foyer where the public can saunter, chat, and flirt. People want to see and be seen, and they certainly take care to look the part.

We wanted the moviegoing public to wear clean clothes, not to turn up in their work clothes—and they arrived wearing tails. People got used to it and began to adhere to this new expectation when it comes to the theater. Some people started turning up at the movies in tuxedos, and there are even establishments where evening dress predominates. What more could we ask for?

Some bold pioneers installed armchairs in the movie theater, hoping this would draw in the *crème de la crème*. And come they did, but they demanded box seats! There are now even theaters where simple box seats are no longer enough; people desperately want something loftier, and so we have the gentlemen's box and the prince's box. If things continue in this way, we will soon reach a state where even the president of the Chamber of Commerce will only be able to afford a plebeian seat on the parquet, and the cinema will be completely in the hands of the blue-blooded aristocracy. Yes, the cinema—that invention which until very recently was considered a form of popular entertainment for the masses, for the little man.

Surveying the scene, many might proclaim: "Spirits that I've cited, / My commands ignore!"¹ We wanted a better class of clientele, and we have gotten the best circles. Our ambitions climbed ever higher, and we immediately reached the summit. The upper crust flocks to us, and soon we will be so used to it that it will no longer be remarkable at all.

Above all else, this invention of ours is distinctive, modern, and novel. Whereas most innovations aim to win approval from the top, assuming it will then trickle down the social scale to those below, we in this branch of theater have gone the other way around. From its origins in the cinematic expo and the traveling show with limelight, we had the cinema, then the theater, and now the meeting place for the top 10 percent.

My, how times have changed.

We movie-theater owners may take credit for the tactical and refined manner in which we drew in a better class of audience over the years, an effort that has met with resounding success. And this success of ours has been as brilliant as we hoped it would be.

We have not only taught the public where to look and how to enjoy looking, we have simultaneously rekindled the pleasure in visiting the theater as an educational establishment. We have raised people into theatergoers, and this is more important from an ethical and social point of view than one is generally prepared to accept.

There are thousands of options for a public that is hungry for distraction. When you consider all the kinds of entertainment, amusement, and pleasure that are available to the average city dweller, you are forced to admit, objectively speaking, that motion pictures surely belong to the noblest among them. And that is why the ethical and educational value of cinematography cannot be overemphasized. Seen from this angle, we may rightfully be proud of our involvement in this noble art that is so much more than a branch of industry. It might even imply the solution to the social question.

Note

1. The quote is from Goethe's poem "Der Zauberlehrling" (The Sorcerer's Apprentice, 1797). The translation here is from *Goethe, the Lyrist*, ed. and trans. Edwin H. Zeydel (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1955), 109.