
In general, people are less worried today about schoolchildren visiting cinematographic theaters. Not long ago, when motion picture theaters were still shooting up from the ground like mushrooms, there was a general concern around the question of whether children should be allowed into such events. The public took a vibrant interest in this question, because the cinemas showed images that people believed to endanger the morality of children. Such pictures have now disappeared. To what extent the police contributed to this and to what extent it resulted from the better judgment of the cinema owners is of little interest.

With this change in content, the question seemed settled for most people—but not for teachers. They believed that these presentations posed a threat to education, and teachers' associations continued to debate the question passionately. As far as I could tell, no one

found a satisfactory answer. Some wished to ban children outright from the cinemas. But the overwhelming majority of concerned teachers took the (surely more correct) viewpoint that we must attempt to make all of our epoch's technological advances useful for instruction and education.

What, then, are the dangers arising for our children when they frequent such theaters? Above all, there is the one great danger brought about by the development of the entire urban lifestyle: that of distraction, confusion, and superficiality in the infant soul. An example should make this clear. One hundred and fifty years ago, a little boy spent his childhood years in Frankfurt am Main, which was not an insignificant city by the standards of its time. Later, he would write about these years as a man who could look back on his entire development. This was Wolfgang Goethe. He tells of two events from his childhood that would determine the course of his entire development: the excitement and confusion brought to Frankfurt by the Seven Years' War and the earthquake in Lisbon.¹ Goethe describes what a decisive influence this single natural event exerted on him. It so strengthened his religious views that, already in his youth, one can speak of his religious thinking and feeling entering a new stage.

Now let us compare this example with a similar event from our own time, perhaps the eruption of Mount Pelée (which, for our epoch, is no farther from Germany than Lisbon was from Frankfurt in 1755).² Let us ask our children how many of them have heard anything about this catastrophe. Let us search for just one child for whom this single natural event took on an indelible meaning. How is it that we all know this search to be hopeless in advance? Because in our time, all great strokes of fate, wherever they happen to occur on earth, are made instantly available to us; before our mind has had time to absorb *one* overwhelming occurrence, the first one has already been suppressed by another. Today, the most tragic events only ever graze the surface of the soul.

When intellectual and emotional life become so superficial, *personalities* can no longer grow, and this is the danger threatening the entire generation of our youth; they will possess no center or focus, no standard within themselves by which to judge all the phenomena around them. Rather, they will be torn from one view to the next by every new experience. We can see just how much less this danger threatens people living in calmer environments when we observe a modest man from the country coming to the big city. We generally smile with a feeling of superiority as we watch his astonishment at all the inexplicable and magnificent wonders the city has to offer. But we ought also to feel a sense of envy as we see how all of these new impressions are unable to upset his equilibrium or tear him away from his basic principles. We, on the other hand, are immediately willing to give up all of our viewpoints and opinions about the various values surrounding us as soon as some amazing new invention or surprising new theory impresses itself upon us.

However, the formation of a strong and stable personality through education has always been the noblest task of educators, and this goal is not likely to change. Because the big city, with its abundance of impressions, already renders this education very difficult, we must defend ourselves when institutions such as the cinema cultivate this bad side of urban life, especially when they do so in the sensitive domain of the emotions. The moral education of a child should certainly include *a few* events that introduce certain emotions into his life, and these events should be deeply anchored in the child's mind. In accordance with the still-tender mind of the child, such feelings should arouse only a certain level of emotion, and above all, they must not occur close in time with opposing sorts of emotions.

But what do we find in the cinema? Serious scenes and scenes of jest alternate in rapid succession, for the cinema demands variety. Anyone who has sat through a cinema

program knows that over the course of hardly half an hour, more or less all of our inner feelings are stimulated—or better yet agitated. And this occurs in the form of an utter confusion of images, which possess a cunning ability—an ability that can only inspire horror in every educator—to impress themselves upon the mind.

For example, one film (and I myself witnessed what I am recounting here) shows the so-called drama of a man who resorts to stealing in order to save his child from hunger and then, having found work as a bricklayer, stands atop the construction site prepared to live out his life as an honest person. But suddenly, when a policeman climbs up the construction site to arrest the thief, the latter takes fright and falls from the building to the ground. We see the man lying crushed on the pavement at precisely the moment when his child, no doubt coming to see the father, arrives on the scene. Here, then, is a shock, a horror, which, were it to happen to anyone in real life, would cause so much emotional excitement that one would need weeks to recover. Children, whose imagination surely transforms this representation into true life, experience every bit of this intense emotional excitement with the child on the screen!

But the drama continues. The compassionate policeman takes the orphaned child into his house, where the latter finds friendly siblings in the policeman's children. Then we see the child in winter kneeling in the snow and praying beside his father's grave. Here, feelings run high even for the adult spectator. I saw many a handkerchief, and I must confess that the film was made with such sophistication that even I could not contain myself. In order to push this emotional stirring to the limit, a solemn prayer was played on a harmonium. On the heels of *horror*, of *shock*, then, comes the most extreme feeling of *compassion*. Children should be spared both of these forms of emotional excitement, unless some merciless stroke of fate subjects them to such emotions early in life. Now onto the next image: a real dose of children's medicine! Hardly *two* minutes after those scenes of the most profound and sacred emotion comes the comic story of a child who pours the laxative he should be taking into his father's cup of coffee. In countless variations, the film now shows how the father begins to feel the medicine's effects already on his way to work. One could debate about whether or not such scenes even belong to the domain of humor, but this is not what interests me here. Rather, what troubles me is these scenes' success: the fact that the children are suddenly moved to the most exuberant joy and now begin to *laugh* themselves to tears.

Let us imagine this rapid change of moods transposed into a real-life situation. A child experiences a blow of fate and, at the very next moment, is capable of whole-hearted joy. We would deeply regret the moral decrepitude of such a child. What we should criticize in cinema theaters, then, is the threat this rapid rundown of the entire scale of emotions poses to the truth and profundity of children's feelings. And this danger is so great that the general public must take it into account, rather than simply watching out for those moments when children get a glimpse of a woman's nude leg or exposed breast.

At the beginning of these observations, I counted myself among those who do not see the solution in a full-scale ban on such events, but rather in making them useful for education. In my opinion, such reform finds its embodiment in the sorts of film presentations offered in the Kosmos-Theater für Belehrung und Unterhaltung [Kosmos Theater for Instruction and Entertainment] in Leipzig.³ The name alone tells us that this is an institute serving public education. In every respect, this theater thoroughly differs from other movie theaters. The walls and windows are not covered with those large and dreadful (dreadful both in the scenes they contain and in their style) posters painted in loud colors, which mock all of our efforts to give our children an aesthetic education. Rather, in display cases in the entrance, one sees tasteful, colorful pictures from other countries together with educational photographs of interesting technological processes.

Entering the theater, one is pleased, first of all, not to find a bare room with white-washed walls, but rather a homelike space decorated with real taste. In addition, anyone who cares about the morality of our children should be filled with joy to see that this theater contains none of those dozens of machines and automatons that, insistent and numerous as they are, burn a hole in children's pockets. And everyone who cares about our children's health will be pleased to know that here, spectators' nerves are not systematically ruined by uninterrupted scandalous music. The only instrument present is a piano, which with the help of a metronomic device has the same pleasant effect as a phonola.⁴

If all of these features are already worthy of praise, this is especially true of the films themselves. In addition to motion pictures, the program includes a slide lecture that changes every week. I myself saw quality hand-painted slides showing characteristic images of the lowland plains of northwest Germany. These slides enabled the audience to visit the city of Bremerhaven and take a tour of a steamer. They showed the Lüneburg Heath, with all of its natural charms, in the most favorable light, and so forth. This was accompanied by a lecture given in clear, comprehensible language, which provided the necessary explanations for the images. The other "educational" images were all cinematic sequences, including a great many films of different geographical regions. Here, too, the cinematographers demonstrated a very precise understanding of their craft. For example, when shooting an image of the countryside in the Vosges Mountains, they made sure to roll the camera just at the moment when a characteristic team of oxen and typical members of the local population were passing by. The atmospheric and poetic images of nature were so perfectly executed as to give the impression of artworks. And by including the right amount of animation in these images, the cinematographer attained something that the artist can never achieve. How poetic is a picture of a lake surrounded by a forest! And how charming it is when a train glides past between the trees! One can only make out parts of the train, but it leaves a trail of blinding white steam among the trees, whose reflection in the play of the water renders the image even more painterly. An artist could never attain such images, which are possible only for nature—and the cinematographer. In my opinion, this is the domain in which motion pictures can truly become a form of art: the domain of "living nature"! In addition to these geographical views and lyrical scenes of nature, the theater also showed very interesting films of athletic events, scenes from everyday life, and modern transportation. (For example, the shot of a snowplow clearing out a snowed-in stretch of mountain railway made a great impression on the spectators.)

Among these stimulating pictures, there were also images designed for entertainment. It was nice to see how much good taste went into choosing the latter. Unfortunately, up to now, cinemas have been guilty of cultivating that so-called American brand of humor taking our epoch by storm, which has very little in common with our German notion of humor. Truly funny pictures, pictures that bring joy to the "heart" and call forth that refreshing laughter of children, are very few and far between. But the Kosmos-Theater had carefully sought out precisely these few images. It was here that I first saw a new sort of game, which consisted of "animating" white stick figures drawn on a black background—just the kind of figures that little Moritz likes to draw. Such a picture was proof to me that there is no shortage of ideas, as long as people make an effort to find funny images that we can present to children as humor with a good conscience.

If I have described the achievements of this theater too thoroughly, this was in order to show that it is possible to create a cinema program corresponding to all of our pedagogical demands. It seems to me that we cannot start imposing rules on these theaters until we are able to tell them what they ought to be playing. But now that we

have made suggestions, we should in all seriousness try to make the theaters carry them out.

Will these motion picture theaters then be able to stay in business? In my view, they will have to raise the prices of their shows with the introduction of reform. And what about the children? Will they also welcome reform? There is only one answer to this question: we are not asking for their opinion. As parents and teachers, only we can decide what's good for our children. Given the choice between a tastefully bound book of high quality and a Wild West tale or Nick Carter covered in dreadfully garish colors,⁵ I have no doubt which book the majority of children would choose; thus I am no more convinced that, if asked for their opinion, they would prefer a well-chosen and quality cinema show to one with a "wild" program. But who would think of claiming that children should read Wild West tales just because they like them?

If children were only *once* given the chance to see such reform programs, and if these programs were accompanied by explanations to direct their attention to the subject matter, such shows would undoubtedly bring them great joy. We all know how much pleasure we can give children in school simply by showing them a still picture, when we accompany it with sufficient explanations to make it more accessible.

But motion picture theaters are *not only* for children, perhaps not even *primarily* for children. We ought to compel adults as well to give up the current form of entertainment and be educated by reform programs! However, as much as I wish that cinemas would become a means of *public education*, that they would play only *educational* programs even for adults, I am nonetheless of the opinion that every adult must be free to choose for himself. We should thus try to convince adults to *voluntarily* demand better programs. For our youth, however, we should insist that cinemas play such educational films and nothing else.

The proper authority in questions of education is the school, not the police.

Notes

1. Goethe's autobiography, *Aus meinem Leben: Dichtung und Wahrheit* (From my Life: Poetry and Truth), contains his accounts of the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 and the Seven Years' War (1756–63).
2. The eruption of Mount Pelée on the island of Martinique occurred in 1902 and caused the death of thirty thousand inhabitants.
3. Founded by the ethnologist and explorer Richard Laube, the Kosmos-Theater was in operation from 1908 to 1911.
4. Similar to the American pianola, the German phonola was an automated mechanical piano which used a roll of perforated paper to operate its keys. Invented at the turn of the twentieth century, it was replaced by the record player and radio.
5. Nick Carter was a fictional private detective popularized through pulp fiction and film serials.