MOTION PICTURES IN ADULT EDUCATION

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STUDIES IN THE SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF ADULT EDUCATION IN THE UNITED STATES

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A Practical Approach

WE live in an Age of Messengers. Almost everybody has a message for everybody else: messages concerning conduct, messages of faith, messages based on facts. Virtue, both public and private, seems to consist in accepting responsibility for the nature of a neighbor's thoughts. Wisdom is made apparent only through a process of broadcasting. This turmoil of hectoring persuasion, noisy declamation, intensive teaching, and endless recitals of needless facts is sanctified by the general name of education. According to our modern view, the capacity to live the good life is dependent on the quantity and quality of education received. All public figures, whether policemen or clowns, have educational duties to perform.

A wise king said: "Understanding is a wellspring of life unto him that hath it: but the instruction of fools is folly."[1] The motion picture industry, like Solomon, evinces a certain reluctance to undertake educational responsibilities. This is considered a breach of faith and is soundly condemned by many educators, churchmen, and sociologists. They reason that moving pictures influence the lives of millions of Americans and that their producers, accordingly, have a social obligation to direct this influ-

[1] Proverbs 16:22.

ence toward public enlightenment. Adaptation of the medium to educational ends is thought to be a technical matter capable of ready solution whenever commercial producers become motivated by right purposes. On the other hand, Hollywood contends that motion pictures can be made and distributed to their present audience on the basis of entertainment alone. Producers maintain that motion picture production is an industry subject to the laws of supply and demand. They conceive the public demand for entertainment to be insatiable, the mass longing for education negligible.

If education is truly a process designed to impose the viewpoints of the most articulate on the busy majority, then control over the motion picture medium is essential to the educational machine. Few would dispute the power of films to implant cultural patterns in naive minds. This rubber-stamp process, however, may be challenged in the name of learning. Whereas power-greedy educators and social reformers may seek tempting short cuts to mass conformity, the traditional discipline of learning is intended to protect rather than to corrupt individual judgment. An attractive presentation of ready-made opinions has many social uses but no educational validity.

The struggle for control over motion pictures is a phase of the current battle between the profit seeker and the social planner. Commercial producers, who seek the people's pennies, are entitled to dispute with social reformers, who desire the public good. Such controversies are the stuff of politics. The place of education in this war is with the Red Cross, repairing the wounds to reason suffered by all partisans.

Though educators have neither right nor power to dictate the fashioning of the people's motion pictures, they are not free to

consider motion pictures beneath their interest and to withdraw from the field. Learning is primarily the organization of multifarious sense impressions into logical and practical patterns. The process of education deals, then, with the arrangement of existing sense material—the facts of nature, the relations of men to men, the ingenuities of art and science. Learning always pants after creation like a harassed nursemaid.

Formerly the wonders of nature, together with recitations of man's achievements in prose and song, formed the basic material of education. The system built to shape this material into reasonable and convenient form has endured for many generations under the name of classical education. Our industrial age confronts the individual with a puzzling variety of new sense data born of mechanism out of science. The assimilation of these novel impressions into the educational pattern is retarded by the rigidity of traditional techniques. Although there are methods of bringing even wild poets into safe educational perspective, there is no existing method that can be applied to movie fantasies, which are allowed exuberant freedom outside the palè of learning.

Because it is obviously unwise to divorce imagination from reason, traditional education has struggled hard to put form and meaning into the content of imaginative thought. In the treatment of literature, drama, philosophy, and even science in schools and colleges, the pedagogue has probably mastered the genius only too well. There remains little fear that the masses trained in our public schools will intoxicate their minds with idle and licentious poetry to the detriment of sober civic virtues. Plato feared greatly such a development in his model Republic and proposed the drastic step of banishing all poets. With more

modern understanding he would have safeguarded his citizens' tender minds through compulsory courses in the history and appreciation of poetry.

Indulgence in visual fantasy has become a major habit in this country, where the weekly attendance at motion pictures is probably somewhere around eighty-five million persons.[2] There is little exact knowledge of the specific effects of this habit on the outlook and interests of the various types of groups comprising the regular motion picture audience. In the limited field of the emotional and intellectual responses of school children, the Payne Fund Studies on Motion Pictures and Youth (published by Macmillan) have made important contributions. The techniques of social psychology, however, are not sufficiently advanced to warrant our considering findings based on statistical evidence anything more than tentative indications. When millions of mature persons of widely different character and background are concerned, it is mere guesswork to generalize as to their deeper responses to the movies.

Lacking any practical knowledge of how a film story achieves its various effects on an audience, it is doubtful whether men of learning could better the output of Hollywood, even if they were granted the opportunity. Educators, like commercial producers, would have to guess and gamble; but unlike the present masters of the industry, they would lack the rule-of-thumb guidance of past experience. Public taste may be roughly estimated by a study of the willingness of masses of people to attend certain

[2] This figure is taken from the report on *Motion Pictures and Radio* by Elizabeth Laine (The Regents' Inquiry into the Character and Cost of Public Education in the State of New York), p. 4. McGraw-Hill, 1938.

pictures even though the motivation to attend may be broken down into thousands of contradictory emotions and ideas that activated separate individuals. Cultural benefits accruing to an audience can hardly be judged except by laborious and difficult methods of individual tests and measurements. If educational interests ever dominate motion pictures, universal examinations at regular intervals will be required to discover whether or not they are competently fulfilling their purposes.

When motion pictures are accepted as a social phenomenon as little subject to educational control as politics or newspapers, then a practical approach to their educational use will become clear. The strong impressions created fortuitously by a film drama can subsequently be organized into patterns of reasoned judgment by educational techniques. The impact of a film on an individual mind lies in the sphere of personal adventure. Emotional and intuitional responses will predominate until the varied impressions have been studied systematically. As this process is the traditional business of education, there seems no good reason why it should not be applied on a general scale to the universal stream of impressions emanating from the picture screen.

Education has grappled with such a subject as geography and has been able to reduce it to a simple pattern of learning. Yet geography, which has its origin in the adventure of travel and in a medley of peoples, customs, landscapes, and climates, can be brought to a semblance of intellectual order only through the imposition of an artificial discipline. In the same way motion pictures present an exciting confusion of situations and fantasies, which stir the mind to interest but have no true meaning until fitted into a larger and more ordered frame of reference.

At present our intellectual and moral guardians approve the film story only when it presents "good" or "helpful" impressions and disapprove it heartily when it threatens evil communications or morbid suggestions. This squeamishness would forever ban the screen as an educational source and would preserve it as a mass hypnotic. If we were to apply this timid standard to travel, it would be wrong and dangerous to venture into territories where peoples engage in customs alien to our own. Geography would consist of an account of places and peoples sufficiently similar to our own to present no likelihood of shocking the innocent mind.

Good and evil in the field of sense impressions must be determined by subsequent reasoning and not by immediate observation. It is time that educational authorities, at least, ceased banal moralizing and accepted their particular task of devising methods that will enable them to use the new medium for educational purposes. The situation of the film today is analogous to that of the printed book shortly after the invention of printing. As an instrument of public enlightenment the film is obviously subject to abuse in matters of morals, taste, accuracy, and emphasis. Social authorities consider it their duty to see that the new device is used to guide the souls of men in the proper direction and not to spread loose tales and dangerous inventions. Books eventually escaped from their worthy censors so that even idle tales spun by men like Geoffrey Chaucer became, to the possible astonishment of the spirits of his contemporaries, a basis of serious education. Censorship and control, both educational and moral, failed in the case of the printed word. What did succeed was the creation of techniques of education that permitted individuals to explore the jungle of free literature with little fear of corruption.

Until the film is accepted as a free source of impressions, regardless of whether it be vulgar, licentious, artistic, accurate, or inaccurate, the educator is helpless to apply to it the specialized techniques of education. When he yearns for control over production he is assuming the role of moralist rather than that of teacher. In our modern communities the former position is perilously close to that of policeman. Once the educator has swallowed his pride and his scruples in order to deal with the sense data that actually exist, he will be able to use the many weapons in his armory to bring some order and decency into the welter of reflections that Hollywood casts before the public eye. The task that remains is technical and practical. In the first place, how can the content of movies be made the basis of reflection and intellectual discussion? In the second place, how can large numbers of people be persuaded to add a measure of educational discipline to their habitual indulgence in picture gazing?

The first question can probably be answered by a study of the techniques that have been developed in the educational treatment of the novel. The habit of reading fiction has been raised from the status of a surreptitious mental vice to the level of a cultural necessity. During the last few years literate adults were placed under almost as much social pressure to read *Gone with the Wind* as to pay their taxes. With slight realization of the educational revolution involved, we accept the fact that "free" reading and "light" literature are among the principal sources of general information.

When books escaped from the jealous tutelage of schools and colleges into the shelves of public libraries, reading became free in the proper sense of the word for the mass of the people. For the first time in history the average person was at liberty to enjoy

almost any type of reading material that might please his fancy. With this step, the center of educational activity shifted from the classroom, with its sermonizing teacher, to the casual bookshelf. New agencies providing service and guidance to a nation of readers arose; librarianship became a powerful profession nurturing the concept of continuous education. As books were freed from the strict confines of academic walls, opportunities for learning became almost as abundant for adults as for children. Extension courses, discussion groups, forums, book clubs, radio talks, and lectures created a steadily growing network of group activity that served to exploit the educational values of free reading.

Although educational agencies have been backward in creating popular techniques to transform the data presented in motion pictures into lasting patterns of learning, there is no intrinsic reason why all knowledge should be verbalized. Books of fiction, magazines, and newspapers are treated as basic educational materials in the majority of enterprises that seek to encourage continuous learning among adults. Yet the average movie informs the ordinary person and stirs his intellect more or less as the run-of-the-mill novel does. If motion pictures were made the subject of lectures by men of learning, were seriously discussed by club groups, analyzed in courses, and related to deeper knowledge by library techniques, then they might prove as effective an incentive to true study as is current literature.

The principal reason why educators have ignored this growing source of popular impressions lies in the nature of the educational system itself rather than in the character of motion pictures. A lag in the application of old educational processes to

new material seems inevitable when the novelty appears within the course of a single generation. Like men in other professions, educators as a group are influenced by the intensive training they received in technical and semitechnical institutions. Few leaders of the profession today were trained in techniques that took any account of the influence of films on children or adults. Accordingly, organized education is tempted to dismiss as irrelevant these disturbing developments that threaten familiar patterns of learning.

Civil war still rages in educational circles concerning the comparative value of verbal learning and the impressionistic insights to be obtained from modern mediums of communication. Philosophical controversialists like Mortimer J. Adler make extreme claims for the movies that might meet stern opposition from their more conservative contemporaries:

"The arts, enriching the imagination and providing vicarious experience which can be directly appreciated, are almost indispensable in social education, both for children in schools and for the adult population. Of the arts, those of fiction serve best because of what they represent; their proper object of imitation is all of human life. Of the arts of fiction, the movies are at once the most popular and the most vivid representation of contemporary society. Their vividness, which is held to be responsible in part for the power they have over children, makes them exceptionally useful as an educational instrument."[3]

The real question at issue, however, is not the theoretical influence of popular films and books as opposed to the lasting effects of formal education; it is, rather, the need of technical methods that will bring arts like the movies within the range of

[3] Mortimer J. Adler, *Art and Prudence,* p. 208. Longmans, 1937.

systematic learning. Until educational agencies create study groups who will use the movies as their central source of information, it will be impossible to judge the practical utility and the limitations of this new medium as an incentive to cultural betterment.

Pioneering work is being carried on in many school systems in the use of films as teaching aids in formal education. In these instances, however, subjects are either created especially for educational ends or are selected carefully to illustrate some points in a formal program of study. The broader aim of using impressions gained from ordinary commercial motion pictures to further learning has not been introduced generally into present-day school curriculums, although courses on motion picture appreciation have recently been added to the English literature curriculums of at least six state school systems.[4] School education, however, is already overcrowded with topics and interests; before including the motion picture as a major subject of study it would be wise to await proof of its educational importance from broader spheres of learning.

It is obvious that adults would constitute a better student body than children for experiments with educational techniques designed to transform motion picture impressions into enduring knowledge. The screen is free within the limits set by the mores of our society and accordingly it presents material intended for mature personalities. Moreover, the patronage of movies is a lifelong habit and, as such, is a proper basis for continuous education.

Cultural bodies will need the cooperation of Hollywood and

[4] Edgar Dale, "Movies and Propaganda," *Seventh Yearbook, 1937, National Council for the Social Studies.*

its agents in any campaign to acquaint movie audiences with the educational opportunities inherent in motion pictures. Without this cooperation, their campaigns will lack the spread and intensity necessary for success. Direct publicity related to the showing of films would be the only practical way to bring together a student body prepared to discuss the same set of screen impressions. The commercial interests that control the production and distribution of films are not at present convinced that profits will result from the educational use of movies.

Motion picture producers and distributors have long reiterated the cry that their livelihood is dependent on popular entertainment: if their pictures amuse the public, they flourish; if the pictures lack this element of entertainment, neither artistic nor cultural qualities will assure box office returns. This common sense point of view, however, has ignored the many-sided nature of entertainment. Hobbies requiring patient effort and considerable knowledge have proved perhaps the most consistent type of mass recreation. Effortless amusements are apt to partake of the character of passing crazes, occupying public attention for a limited period but inevitably giving way to more novel diversions. Any passive pleasure that fails to challenge individual powers of mind, body, or soul must end in cloying boredom.

Although the movies have grown steadily in popular favor for several decades, they have lived to some extent on their capital. Constant novelty for the spectator has been achieved by impressive technical developments. Ingenious methods of photography, of recorded sound, of *montage,* and of plot construction have provided jaded appetites with quick-fire stimulants. The rapid pace of mechanical development may conceivably continue, thus providing a passive public with continual new wonders before

it has time to weary of the old. On the other hand, the physical character of the motion picture may be approaching its full growth, in which case future novelties will be possible only in the fields of content and artistry of treatment. If the latter prospect is the true one, then Hollywood is faced with the necessity of re-examining its conceptions of entertainment.

When novelty and wonder begin to fade, passive spectators feel the need of some sense of participation in the show going on before their eyes. Present-day movies strive for this type of audience activity through skillful incentives to emotional identification on the part of the spectator with the scenes and characters dramatized on the screen. The movie-goer "plays" by imagining that he is taking part in the glamorous situations portrayed in celluloid reality. The game, like all fantasy life, amuses and stimulates up to a point, but when that limit has been reached, it either degenerates into a joyless habit or demands satisfactory results in the world of actuality. It would be sheer guesswork to estimate how many constant movie patrons have reached the stage where emotional participation has been dulled into a routine habit. There can be little doubt, however, that the appeal of the screen has lost a great deal of its urgency for mass audiences within the last few years.

Entertainment of a sort that excites the mental powers, calling forth effort and concentration, is the obvious antidote to pointless fantasy. When daydreaming evokes skills and incites the dreamer to hard study, it may readily become the center of the recreational life. Motion pictures, even when designed solely to amuse, contain incidental material capable of rousing the serious attention of an audience. The screen critic of *The New York Times* touches on this point in an ironical review of a prison