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CLASS-CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE 'MOVIES'

"The line of demarcation between theatrical audiences and movie audiences will grow ever sharper, the one representing entirely the bourgeoisie and upper classes, and the other the proletariat"

BY WALTER PRICHARD EATON

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I

Motion pictures, or the 'movies' as they are popularly called, are a development of the twentieth century. We can all remember when they were unknown; then a considerable period when they were exhibited in the vaudeville houses, always at the end of the programme—the good-night act; then the time, scarcely more than a decade ago, when little theatres began to crop out devoted exclusively to motion pictures, and charging an admission fee of only five or ten cents. At the present time it is almost safe to say that there is not a town of over five thousand inhabitants in the country without its motion-picture theatre, and in many sections the films are exhibited at least once a week in towns as small as one thousand. Various calculations have been made to determine the number of people who daily attend the movies in the United States, the figures ranging from an inside estimate of four million, to an outside figure of ten million. Even the smaller estimate is sufficiently impressive, but probably, in prosperous times at least, the higher is more nearly correct. Ten per cent of our population, then, are patrons of the motion pictures.

These facts, I am aware, have been stated over and over, to the point of weariness, and various interpretations put upon them, or deductions drawn from them. It has been pointed out, with truth, that the motion pictures, owing to their cheap price of admission and their extreme mobility, have added an entirely new source of amusement for small communities, where in the old days regular, or even, sometimes, occasional, dramatic entertainment was out of the question. It has also been pointed out that in the larger communities an individual, and more especially a family, can secure an evening of relaxation and entertainment much more frequently than before, because the head of a household, for example, can take his wife and three children to the movies for the price of one gallery seat at a regular playhouse. It has been still further pointed out that not only is the outlay smaller, but the return is more certain, and the sense of disappointment less, also, if the entertainment does not please. At the motion-picture theatre more than one drama is presented—often four or five. At least one of them is bound to please. Paying five times as much admission even to the top gallery, the patron of the spoken drama, in any town except the few large centres, is generally taking chances with an unknown play and unknown players. The smallest town, however, sees the same motion-picture players as the largest—there are no second companies in the film world. John Bunny and Mary Pickford 'star' in a hundred towns at once.

The result has been, so the theatre managers themselves agree, not only the practical extinction of the cheaper melodramas which used to cater to 'the masses,' the 'ten-twenty-thirties,' as they were called, plays which had no literary quality whatever, and were never so well done as film-players do the same sort of thing, but also the practical desertion of the gallery seats for dramas of the better sort. A generation ago it would have been almost inconceivable that a man would build a theatre without any gallery in it. Yet Mr. Ames's Little Theatre in New York has not only no gallery, but no balcony. It is simply a drawing-room with the floor tilted. A second theatre with no balcony is now being erected in New York, and several of the newest houses have no gallery. The day of the gods is over.

Now, just what does all this mean? It means, the optimists will tell you, that the masses of the people are getting at last cheap amusement, on the whole of a good grade. Better and better productions are being made by the motion-picture firms, better actors are appearing on the screens, the Pathé Frères are presenting interesting and truly educational pictures of current events all over the world, a board of censors sees to it that objectionable film-dramas are for the most part eliminated, and the spoken drama is learning to adapt itself successfully to the new conditions. There appear to be just as many regular theatres as ever, and an even greater interest among educated people in the art of the playhouse. Moreover, as the motion pictures improve in quality, these same optimists say, they will 'educate' many of their patrons to a desire for higher things. They will act as a school of appreciation for the spoken drama; they will breed new audiences for the legitimate playhouse.

This is a comforting—and a comfortable—view. It is a view we all wish we could hold. The present writer stuck to it as long as he could. But one does not need to be a Marxian Socialist, it seems to me, to detect, with a little thought and some observation of actual conditions, the economic basis of motion-picture popularity, and to feel that, so long as that economic basis exists, the breach between the film drama and the spoken drama will always exist also. You cannot, of course, draw any hard-and-fast line which will not be crossed at many points. In Atlanta, Georgia, for example, you may often see automobiles parked two deep along the curb in front of a motion-picture theatre, which hardly suggests an exclusively proletarian patronage. It does, however, suggest that Atlanta has a meagre supply of the higher type of dramatic entertainment. On the other hand, when Sothorn and Marlowe used to play Shakespeare at the old Academy of Music or the Manhattan Opera House in New York, the galleries were always packed with a proletarian audience. Nevertheless it is perfectly safe to say that in the larger towns, where the higher-priced drama coexists with the motion-picture plays, the line of cleavage is sharply drawn in the character of the audience, and this line is the same line which marks the proletariat from the *bourgeoisie* and capitalist class.

In the smaller towns, of course, the line is much less sharply drawn, and in the villages, where 'regular plays' never come, it is hardly drawn at all. But it is just in these villages, also, we must note, where modern industrialism has its least hold, that elder American institutions and social conditions most persist. In the average American village of a few thousand souls, even today, you will not find class-consciousness developed. The proletariat is not aware of itself. The larger the town, the greater the degree of class-consciousness—and the sharper the line of cleavage between the audiences at the spoken drama and at the movies. Indeed, in a certain New England city of thirty-five thousand people, a concerted attempt was made two years ago by several wealthy men to provide good theatrical fare. They purchased the best theatre in the town and installed an excellent stock company. The gallery seats sold for as low as ten cents, thus competing with the movies. But the theatre was on the 'fashionable' side of town, it was looked upon by the six thousand mill operatives and their families (constituting a proletariat which numbered more than fifty per cent of the population) as something that belonged to

the other class—and they would not go near it. Consequently the well-meant attempt was a failure, while the movies continued to flourish as the green bay tree.

That is, perhaps, in the present state of things, an extreme example, showing rather how matters are going to be than how they generally are. At present, it is certainly not necessary to find any definite state of feeling to explain the cleavage between the two audiences. The economic explanation is quite sufficient.

Testifying recently before the United States Commission on Industrial Relations, Scott Nearing, of the Economics Department of the University of Pennsylvania, said, 'I believe that half of the adult wage-earners of the United States get less than \$500 a year; I believe that three fourths get less than \$750 a year; and I believe that nine tenths get less than \$1000. A careful survey of all the wage-literature published shows that the wage-worker who gets \$1500 is an extraordinary, a unique, exception.'

Bearing these facts in mind,—and they are hardly to be disputed in their larger aspects, though there may be some exaggeration in the figures, or at any rate some mitigating circumstances which Mr. Nearing does not take into account,—how ridiculous it is to expect the wage-worker in New York, Boston, or Chicago, where even gallery seats (good gallery seats, at any rate) are fifty cents each, and where some theatres have no galleries, to take his wife and family to enjoy the art of Mrs. Fiske or Forbes-Robertson, to see the productions of Frohman and Belasco, to be uplifted by Shakespeare or cheered by Cohan or made thoughtful by Galsworthy or tickled and provoked by Shaw! If fifty per cent of the wage-workers of these cities receive but \$500 a year, you can figure for yourself, gentle reader, what proportion of a week's pay it would require for the father in this class to take his wife and two children to the theatre. Even supposing that his yearly wages reach the enormous figure of \$1000 a year, so that he is earning \$20 a week, the father of a family would probably think twice before he invested two dollars in seats to 'Hamlet' or 'The Follies of 1914.'

Out on the road, to be sure, the prices are frequently scaled down, and it becomes possible to see a play for twenty-five cents instead of fifty; but even at that rate a wage-earner will think a long time before investing. Moreover, the motion-picture theatre, where he does go for his evening's relaxation, is almost always much nearer to his home, possibly saving him an additional expense in carfare. If he has children, he can take three of them as well as his wife for the price of one gallery seat at the regular theatre—and, what is an important point to consider, he will not be segregated from the rest of the audience, the 'shirt-front' contingent below stairs, the class which employs him by day. He will sit on the ground floor, with his own kind, feeling as it were a kind of proprietorship in the playhouse. Here he is apart from his daytime distinctions of class; he is in an atmosphere of independence. He is paying as much as anybody else, and getting as good a seat. It will require a tremendous deal of 'educating' before you can persuade such a man to invest a dollar and a quarter instead of twenty-five cents, out of a yearly wage of \$500, on a single evening's entertainment, and to invest it in a theatre where he enters by the back stairs.

No, so long as the economic structure of our society remains as it is, and so long as our theatres are conducted as they are at present, the movies will not be to any appreciable extent a training school for audiences, fitting them for an appreciation of the spoken drama; nor will the movies grow any fewer in the land. Instead, the line of demarcation between theatrical audiences and movie audiences will grow ever sharper, the one representing entirely the *bourgeoisie* and upper classes, and the other the proletariat. The movies will become ever more powerfully a factor in the growth of class-consciousness.

Already, as I have indicated, this result may be seen in the legitimate theatres as well as in the movie houses.

When theatres are built without galleries or balconies, when they are decorated like drawing-rooms and no seat is sold for less than two dollars, or even two dollars and a half, what chance is there of a democratic audience? More and more our playhouses are shrinking in size. There has not been a theatre built to house dramas in New York in recent years which could not almost be placed on the stage of the old Boston Theatre. This is said to be a result of the changed conditions of the drama itself, modern realism having dictated an intimate type of playhouse. In part that is true—but only in part. It is almost equally true that in recent years the managers (who would not care a snap about the proper presentation of intimate drama if they could fill the Metropolitan Opera House with it improperly presented, or with something else) found that they could not fill the larger houses. The upper galleries were just so much waste space. Their support came from what they call 'the two-dollar crowd.' Therefore they built for the two-dollar crowd—they built gilded drawing-rooms. That development continues to-day. So does the development of the movies. Already the spoken drama and the silent drama are far apart. Each is the amusement, the pastime, of a separate and antagonistic class.

II

I do not think that it would be at all difficult to show that this is bound to have a bad effect on the spoken drama, but I am rather less concerned with that phase of the question here than with the effect on the proletariat. It is surely a matter of record that the great periods of the drama have been coincident with periods of national awakening—true of all branches of the arts, perhaps. The Athenian drama and the Athenian state went hand in hand, for instance. The name of Shakespeare and the name of Drake can hardly be separated. Ibsen and modern Norway were a joint growth. The drama in France has always been close to the consciousness of the nation. We have no native opera in America; it is an imported pastime of the capitalist class—as we may call them in this paper, which set out with a title borrowed from the Socialists. But you may hear any Italian laborer digging a ditch or laying a railroad burst into an air from Verdi, because opera is his national speech. To think of Vienna is to think of Johann Strauss. We have as yet no body of American drama worthy of the name. Bronson Howard, James A. Herne, and Clyde Fitch gave us the beginnings of such a drama, and other men still living and active have striven to carry on the work, men especially like Eugene Walter and Augustus Thomas. But of late there has been a disappointing lack of progress.

It is not that dramas are not written by Americans, or even that they are not well written by Americans. George Cohan's *Seven Keys to Baldpate* was extraordinarily well written—or shall we say well made? Rather it is that they never get down to national fundamentals, that they have no intellectual seriousness (which does not mean tragedy, or even necessarily any lack of comedy, as our present-day audiences seem to suppose). When Clyde Fitch's play, *The Truth*, was revived last winter after nine years, it was almost shocking to see how much more seriously he took his task as a dramatist than our entertainers of the hour. He was tracking down a woman's character; the hunt that thrilled was the hunt for her soul.

To-day the plot is the thing, and just now the dramatist who can give a new and unexpected twist to a 'situation' or tell his story backward is acclaimed as king. Is this not a symptom of sophistication? Is not sophistication bound to come in at the window when the proletariat goes out by the door, even if it is the back door? It is always true, I think, that a person who has never been obliged to earn his own living lacks a certain solidarity of view that neither sympathy nor good intentions nor moral character can

supply. Just so the wage-earners of a nation, who have lived perpetually close to the sterner realities, supply an element which the drama needs, which must have, to achieve the universality and power demanded of any truly national expression in the arts. A theatre without a gallery means a drama without a soul.

No doubt this point could be elaborated upon at considerable length, but after all it less concerns our present discussion than does the effect of the movies upon the proletariat. When we speak of class-consciousness, we do not mean the consciousness of 'class.' Certain people have always been quite conscious that they were superior beings, even in democracies like our own. There is nothing new about that. But what we mean by class-consciousness, as a revolutionist term, is the consciousness of the proletariat; not that it is socially inferior at present, but that it proposes to be economically equal in the future, and that this result is to be achieved by concerted class-action, whether forcible or parliamentary.

The growth of this idea, of this class-consciousness, is something every revolutionist is working for, and anything which will increase that growth is looked upon as so much gain by many. In 1881, for example, at the time of the Nihilist agitation in Russia, a great and brutal anti-Semitic rising occurred, and there were leaders of the revolutionist movement who looked upon this as a blessing, because those who beat and robbed and murdered the Jewish 'usurers' were mostly Russian peasants, and their concerted action meant that they were achieving class-consciousness. The argument is grotesquely horrible, of course, yet it was seriously made. In like manner the Syndicalists—represented in this country by the I.W.W.—are perfectly willing, in order to strike a blow, however blind, at Capitalism and increase class-consciousness, to encourage *sabotage* with all its demoralizing effect on the moral tone of the workingmen themselves. From the Syndicalist's point of view, then, surely, the movies should be regarded as a blessing, as an aid in the growth of class-consciousness, for they are rapidly segregating the theatrical amusement of the proletariat from the theatrical amusement of the master class, and drawing the line of social cleavage more and more sharply.

But any sound Socialist should tell you—what you yourself who are not a Socialist will readily concur in—that any injury to the capitalists which does not result in a corresponding gain to the working class, is folly; and equally he should tell you—and equally you will concur—that any growth in class-consciousness which is accomplished at the expense of the moral, intellectual or spiritual fibre of the proletariat is a dubious gain if not a distinct backward step. In practically shutting off the proletariat from the spoken drama, as we are doing (our New England city of 35,000 showed a proletariat of at least 20,000 who would not or did not attend the legitimate playhouse), and throwing them back on an exclusive amusement diet of motion pictures, what are we doing to them? Are we helping them or harming them? Should their own leaders rejoice at a gain in class-consciousness, or consider gravely the other side of the balance—the loss of romance, of poetry, of intellectual stimulation,—all the varied aesthetic appeal of the most universal of the fine arts, the art of the theatre?

I am perfectly well aware that many people will consider this question of but trivial importance. I am also well aware that many others will retort, and retort truly, that very often the movies are an excellent institution, supplying innocent amusement, often educational in value, to people who would otherwise be without resources for amusement. I do not for a moment deny it. In the smaller towns the movies are a boon. I myself would infinitely rather see *Cabiria* on the motion-picture screen, for that matter, than half the melodramas on Broadway. But the small town which never had an amusement centre till the movies came is far from the heart of the problem, and *Cabiria* and its kind are far from the normal motion picture. The question is not between the movies and nothing, but between the movies, the

average five- and ten-cent movies (*Cabiria* was exhibited on Broadway at a dollar a seat) and the spoken drama—in other words, between a semi-mechanical pantomime and a fine art.

Let us put the matter a little differently. In our schools we attempt to teach the best literature, to inculcate ideals of good music and sound art. We open museums and establish free libraries. Why? For the simple reason that we believe, and rightly believe, that a knowledge and love of these better things is a bulwark of our civilization. We do not open museums of fine paintings for one class, and museums of photographic reproductions of poor paintings for the proletariat. That would be inconceivable. We do not establish libraries of the world's choice literature for one class, and, for the proletariat, provide endless editions of dime novels. That, too, would be inconceivable. In our socialistic institution, the school, we give alike to all; in our socialistic institution, the public library, we give alike to all; even in our semi-philanthropic institution, the museum, we give alike to all; and always for the same reason, that our civilization may be bulwarked to its foundation by what we call culture.

But what of the drama, the most universal, the most vividly appealing, the most direct and potent of the arts? Many people read but occasionally. Still more are but slightly reached, if at all, through the medium of pure vision—by painting and sculpture. Yet the drama goes home to everybody, old and young, rich and poor, educated and uneducated. It has ever been so, and will ever be so. It is inherent in our very natures. So instinctive is our response to it that it has almost never been regarded as 'cultural' or 'educational.' It is regarded as amusement. We are all willing to pay for it, within our means. How can it fail, then, to reach us more surely than any other art? How can it fail, in a deeper, truer sense, to be potentially of the very highest cultural value?

Think for a moment of the place that Shakespeare holds in the culture of the race! Shakespeare was a dramatist, and his plays, coned dully in our schools, live on the stage to move us. Had Shakespeare the dramatist failed Shakespeare the poet would have been forgotten these many years. Your memory and mine, going back over our lives, conjure up recollection after recollection of happy hours in the theatre, when we have wept and laughed with Jefferson, grown sad with Booth till he lifted us up to a never-to-be-forgotten vision of those flights of angels singing him to rest, known the fever and the heartache of romantic love with Miss Marlowe on Juliet's balcony, thrilled to the staccato tones of Mrs. Fiske, or pondered the paradoxes of existence in the provocative plays of G.B.S. Amusement, yes; but how much more! The charm of personality affecting us, the roll of poetry in our ears, the thrill of climax, the rattle of repartee, the spell of romance, the enlivening spectacle of social contrasts worked out under our gaze, the stimulation of intellectual reflection on the concrete facts of life, the glamour of beauty, of lights, of stage pictures—that is the theatre, that and how much else besides! Is it not a part of our cultural equipment, is it not knit in the very fibre of our civilization?

And what have the movies to offer in its place? I want to be fair to them. They offer geographical pictures of educational value, as well as pictures illustrating current events and natural history. Occasionally, a film has some real historical worth, like *Cabiria*, or, like the same film, some real pictorial charm. But when that is said, you have said nearly all possible. They are capable of expressing more personality than a static photograph, of course; but to imagine the princely quality of Forbes-Robertson's Hamlet, that concrete emanation of a lofty ideal, in a motion picture! They have a cruel realism which at once dulls the imagination and destroys the illusive romance of art. They are utterly incapable of intellectual content. That could be deduced had you never seen one. After seeing hundreds and hundreds, as I have done, experience tells you that only the skeleton of narrative is possible, and

usually that narrative is utterly banal. All poetry, all music, all flash of wit, all dignity of spoken eloquence, they can never know.

There can be no Shakespeare in the movies, no Shaw, no Booth, no Jefferson, no Gilbert and Sullivan, no Johann Strauss, no Julia Marlowe or Mrs. Fiske. What does it matter if such as these latter players act before the screen? 'Mrs. Fiske in Tess' is announced in the motion-picture houses, but you almost weep when you witness that travesty on her poignant art, that reduction of a soul-gripping play to a poor pantomimic skeleton, like an illustrated report in a Hearst newspaper.

Impersonal—that is the word which perhaps describes the motion picture better than mechanical. You view the dumb actions of human beings as through a glass. We all know how difficult it is, when sitting in a café at the next table to a group of strangers whose talk we overhear, to find anything amusing in the jokes which they enjoy. We are not in contact with them, and our own personality, with all that it implies, is not called forth. In the motion pictures we do not even overhear the talk. There is no talk. We see the actions of puppets, but it has little meaning oftentimes, and to our personality there is no call whatever. Yet it is the very essence of the value of amusements that in them, because they are spontaneous, our personalities have freest play, and in the life of the child particularly the individual is thus most effectively developed. The cooperation between audience and actor in a fine play is something which baffles analysis, perhaps, but is too real to question; and after such an experience both the actor and the audience feel that some change has occurred within them. But no more change is possible to the audience at a motion picture than if they viewed some far-off action of strangers in dumb show through a window. The soul is not reached.

III

Such is the theatre, such are the movies; 'and never the twain shall meet.' Who can say that a class-consciousness gained by the loss of the former is an advantage, either to the proletariat themselves or to our nation? What is the subtle but incalculable loss to the next generation?

It will doubtless be urged by many that this result, however unfortunate, is inevitable, that it is a natural evolution. What a comfortable answer that always is! It is a natural evolution, yes—of our present system. But it is only inevitable on the supposition that our present system is irrevocable, a supposition which few of us any longer hold. The theatre is now entirely conducted in America under a system of competitive capitalism; but we long ago took our schools away from such management, and our libraries. There is nothing to prevent our doing the same with our theatres, except the weight of public opinion.

We have not yet realized the place of the theatre in the life of a nation. Still Puritans at heart, we do not yet believe that anything we enjoy so much can be of value to our souls! The democratizing of the drama on the Continent has been accomplished under benevolent despotism—and think of the gains which have resulted to all the allied arts of the theatre! Such a method would be impossible here, no doubt, without the sanction of the popular vote. With that sanction, we should achieve a socialized theatre, and the superbly direct and vivid arts of the playhouse would be open to all, and in them all would feel proprietorship.

Every municipality large enough to support a theatre comfortably should have a municipal playhouse, not of the tiny and 'intimate' type, but large enough to provide many seats competing in price with the

movies; and in the trusteeship and management of this theatre the proletariat should have equal share. In the larger centres there should be branch theatres, just as there are branch libraries, for the performance, under the simplest of conditions and at the minimum price, of fine plays close to the homes of the workers. When we think that the plays of Galsworthy were first performed in America at Hull House, we need not fear the lack of proletarian appreciation. That appreciation is essential, indeed, to the dramatist who would grapple with fundamental things, and without it no large body of serious national drama is likely ever to be written.

But here is neither the time nor the space to expand a scheme for a civic theatre. My purpose was to show the need therefor, a need which has arisen in our nation just in proportion as a proletariat has arisen, and which is now emphasized and made more insistent by the growth of the movies with the consequent deflection of almost the entire wage-earning population away from the spoken drama to the infinitely inferior and spiritually stultifying mechanical film-play. And with the steady increase of class-consciousness effected by this cleavage, the task of bridging the gulf again will be rendered constantly more difficult, if only because the proletariat will become constantly less susceptible to finer aesthetic appeals.

The problem, if it is ever tackled at all, will perhaps be given up as hopeless by the leaders of our present regime; it will be labeled a Utopian dream. But Utopian dreams are just what the Socialists thrive upon. The civic theatre is hereby commended to them, as a needed propaganda. Thrilling songs may yet be sung and stirring dramas written to the steady tramp of revolution!

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