

MOVIES

H. A. POTAMKIN & S. BRODY

The Big House, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Astor Theatre, New York.

Numbered Men, First National-Vitaphone, Winter Garden, New York.

The movie is symptomatic of America at its lowest level. It expresses the social mind at that level. The lowest level of the social mind, the least critical level, is the dominant stratum. Dominant as it is, it defends itself by evasions, by the shifting of the burden of guilt. These two films inspired by the social turbulence of prison-breaks are expressions of this shifting of the charge.

We have here two films, the first a product of one of the best American factories, the other of one of the worst: shop-competence, incompetence. But the minds revealed are identical. Both are frivolous even facetious. The burden of the guilt has been shifted by shifting the emphasis of the story. In *The Big House* society is accused by the warden, who points to the overcrowded cells as a foreboding; by the genial guard, who warns against putting the boy, whose crime is running down someone with his auto, with the two hardened criminals, and by the machine-gun murderer, who revolts at the food, provoking the entire convictbody into an outburst and himself into solitary confinement. In the first two instances, the charges are only remarks, they do not get into the woof of the film, informing it, giving it meaning. As in *All Quiet*, the director has not sought to make the entire film the vehicle of the attack, but restricted the attack to some verbal statements. Dialogue cannot carry the mood, the film as a whole is the vehicle. The accusations therefore remain incidents—passing and unemphatic. Whatever suggestion of social guilt they contain is dissipated by the events of the story, and their treatment.

We are not made to experience the accusations: the overcrowding, the bad food. The bad food doesn't argue in itself, as did the maggotty meat of *Potemkin*. It does not explain the outburst. The camera does not expose its filth. There was no attempt to construct an unavoidable mood, because there was no wish to construct it, and no ability. The film lacks *temper*, it is another American jest.

The film, concentrating as it does the major action in the prison, might have been a powerful experience. But the predilection for the comic spirit at once lightens the intensity. The concentration of the theme is severed by moving the action for a period out of the prison into the street, the girl's bookshop and home. The film should have been contained in the close environment of the prison, unrelieved by whimsicality or horseplay or the soft tone of the letter informing the murderer of his mother's death. The film should have been *intensive*, gray, cumulative. Its model might well have been *The Passion of Joan of Arc*. We should have felt the slow process of festering, monotonous, oppressive, bursting in the riot—just as the mob-explosion released the accumulation within the dungeon at Rouen. The film, as an art, is a progressive medium moving toward intensiveness. It is a process, not simply a story. But to create a process in the movie requires awareness of the process of society, and the mind of the movie—the American movie—does not possess awareness.

Numbered Men is an incompetent *Big House*. The idyllic flavor is at once imparted: the farmer's dame who serves the road-gang doughnuts, the loyal girl who has taken a job at the farmhouse to be near her lover, wrongly imprisoned. The typical formula is carried out: one of the prisoners is advised his wife is dead—this serves as an impetus to escape (as in *The Big House*); there is a killer here too who boasts, like the murderer in the Metro film, of his prowess (*The Hairy Ape* motif)—the difference is that in the Metro film we are made to like the whimsical brute whereas in the Vitaphone masterpiece he is the nemesis. He is, in fact, the instrument whereby the guilt is shifted from society. Indeed,



BOURGEOIS ART

Adolph Dehn.

there is nothing we can hold against society, save the incarceration of the innocent boy. This blemish is eradicated when another prisoner confesses to the crime, sacrificing himself to an extended sentence. So are problems solved. The prison itself is more idyllic than *The Big House*. In the latter the warden complains of 3000 men brooding in idleness, though we never get to feel it. In *Numbered Men* there is a big sunny room where a convict, if he is good, may play the harmonica or read *The American Mercury*. The moment of the riot is brief. It isn't a riot, it's a dash. The prisoners hunt for the runaway to preserve the honor system. Some fifteen years ago Fox produced *The Honor System*, a more exciting film on the theme. It was a popular motif in those days. In 1905 Vitagraph manufactured *Escaped from Sing-Sing*. . . and a quarter-century later we find the film-factories issuing stuff that shows no advance in point-of-view. The mind of the movie is even more callow now.

Callowness has more than orthographic resemblance to callousness. The society that is callow in its cinema is callous in its attitude toward imprisoned men. The audience that is amused by the spectacle of men being marked and numbered is the society that kills Sacco and Vanzetti, imprisons for life Mooney and Billings, railroads the leaders of the workers in New York, North Carolina, Georgia and California. It is that society which produces *The Big House* and *Numbered Men*; another society produces *In Old Siberia*, that poignant lyrical Soviet film of the plight of the political prisoners in Czarist Russia. As the days go on, the American movie will get farther and farther away from the film exposing the social evils. Once it was possible to have *The Jungle* filmed, pictures of Czarist oppressions and anti-semitism, movies condemning the exploitation of the poor farmer in the everglades of Florida. American society becomes more concentrated, more protective. The movie becomes more concentrated, more symptomatic. A counter-process is at work, the revolutionary threat. This intensifies the instinct for self-preservation in the mind of the dominant class. The movie reveals the intensification. All elements of vital criticism are eliminated, but there is one criticism that is ever-present, the film itself. It is the business of the critic to present in full this evidence of which the movie speaks.

HARRY ALAN POTAMKIN.

● "About the Sea and About the Fishermen"

Drifters—Directed by John Grierson. 55th Street Playhouse, New York.

Drifters is a film of sincere intentions and feeble cinematic craftsmanship. A case in which a very willing spirit succumbed to a weak and inexperienced flesh, because good intentions do not necessarily make good films.

It is "a film of the actual," as its director has it, and like all

films of this class, presents special problems both in point of structure and thematic treatment.

In the acted studio film, the scenario must determine everything—the theme and its interpretation (selection of actors), the action-treatment and the specific plastic material (Pudovkin), the tonal values as determined by lighting, etc. The production, in other words, is created out of the whole cloth, the scenario being, in its final form, the closest approximation to the completed film that words and diagrams can possibly make it. Thus it became clear that the ideological approach, the “slant,” is integrally interwoven into the structure and technical treatment of the story. This is what some gentlemen refer to as “propaganda,” conveniently forgetting that a definite viewpoint, independent of the material is inescapable in any film, be it made in Hollywood or in Turkestan. In this type of film the scenario is in every respect primary, the actual filming being the complementary offshoot.

In the documentary film the scenario must serve the purpose of *organizing* already existing material so that the film will progress according to a preconceived idea which will act as a guide and lend character to the whole. Any other method will result in a mere compilation of scenes having logical sequence but devoid of the cumulative effect which is the first essential in a film. Until the Russians showed us the way, this was (and in America *still is*) the way reality was filmed. That is why we have learned to look upon the documentary as an unimportant item in film-making while the Russians have, with films like *Shanghai Document* and *Turksib*, raised it to the highest level of cinema achievement.

In *Drifters* we have an example of a film in which the director has approached his material without organizing it in such a way as to convey a particular idea or evoke a desired reaction from the onlooker. The effect is left to chance and the power of the filmed material itself to create an impression. This is the way of the “nature study” film. It is true that here and there we find in *Drifters* an attempt to compose certain effects by the juxtaposition of pieces (montage), but to use montage methods to create isolated effects rather than to impart to the film a unified and appropriate rhythm, is to abuse a method which is the recognized cornerstone of film art.

A few months ago, Grierson wrote about his film:

“Men at their labor are the salt of the earth; the sea is a bigger actor than Jannings or Nikitin or any of them, and if you can tell me a story more plainly dramatic than the gathering of the ships for the herring season, the going out, the shooting at evening, the long drift in the night, the hauling of nets by infinite agony of shoulder muscle in the teeth of a storm, the drive home against a head sea, and (for finale) the frenzy of a market in which said agonies are sold at ten shillings a thousand, and iced, salted and barrelled for an unwitting world—if you can tell me a story with better crescendo in energies, images, atmospherics and all that make up the sum and substance of cinema, I promise you I shall make a film of it when I can.”

Such a summary is, for many reasons, flabby and not altogether adaptable to cinematic purposes. But even the weak guiding-idea contained in it might have resulted in a more powerful film if a scenario had been mounted accordingly. Instead, *Drifters* is at all times at a respectable distance from its subject. There is not a single facial close-up of the exploited fishermen in the whole film; and there can be no “intimacies” where the close-up is not used. It is the essence of intimacy in the motion picture. There is an interesting storm, and a threatening whale, but very little of the “agonies” that Grierson writes about. The approach remains mechanical and detached. A film *around* fishermen, but never *about* them.

I believe that *Drifters* lacks “propaganda.” Propaganda about the underpaid and exploited Shetlands fishermen. Propaganda against child labor in the fishing industry. Propaganda against the class responsible for the misery of impoverished proletarian fishermen. The class struggle is an even greater actor than the sea, Mr. Grierson; and the driving mate is fiercer than all the man-eating whales in the world.

No doubt, the making of a film about subjects so externally devoid of heroics and clash as the daily lives of Gloucester fishermen is no easy task. But for one who claims to be an humble pupil in the school of the Soviet kino, there can be no possible excuse.

SAMUEL BRODY.

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