

BOOK REVIEWS

Film: *The Democratic Art*

by Garth Jowett

518 pp. Boston-Toronto:
Little, Brown and Co. \$20.

It is a truism that when the economic bite is on the community at large, attendance at the movies increases. Now, in the mid-'70s, our democratic institutions are being severely challenged, because they have failed to serve economic principles, while the more recent institution — moviegoing — is being reaffirmed as an essential institution in our quasi-democratic society.

The main theme of Garth Jowett's social history is the accommodation that society has found it necessary to make in order to elevate moviegoing to the role of a major social institution. The book is a definitive, widely researched work of the first magnitude. There is a narrative of the origins of the industry's development, through its constant attempts to respond and adjust to its audience, through the early encounters with censorship and attempts by interest groups to gain control over the contents of the movies. The war years gave the industry further opportunities for another kind of accommodation: that of influencing public and troops of the democratic cause — making the world safe for democracy. Later Jowett chronicles the decline of the institution as other media entered the public consciousness and established themselves in the lifestyle of the masses. What of the future? Jowett sees it as a struggle for power over the audience.

At the turn of the century, the movie audience we have taken for granted for decades did not exist. Those who tried to discern the portents of the new century could not read the signs on their social horizon. Jowett, carefully and in nice detail, recreates the background for us. It seemed unlikely to happen — a possibility to be dreaded. But, at the right time, Jowett turns back the hands of the clock and makes

it seem that the impossible is as inevitable as sunrise. The natural ingredient became evident — need (the greed came later).

Out of increased leisure time arose the desire for entertainment. The dime museums, dance halls, shooting galleries, however, merely amused. With the appearance of the trolley car Sunday outings were invented — education was added to amusement. Only city people, though, could enjoy these attractions. The country folk fared less well — chuch, fishing and a little flirting on Sunday. Another factor was the thousands of immigrants who worked long hours for less money and had a language barrier. They too sought inexpensive entertainment and a sense of belonging. There was a multifaceted question that, as it seems now thanks to Jowett, only the movies could unify into the one answer. Jowett makes us feel, through his sources, the thrill of these historical moments. When those people, seemingly remote from our age, waited in the pre-technological dawn like tens of thousands of illegitimate princes and princesses in the land of opportunity for their magic palace to appear; when the Nickelodeon opened no one knew that the alchemy of turning base metal into gold had at last been discovered. The value of that process has often been in doubt, but the need for it has not. The sign that appeared on the economic horizon — and that created a social institution — was surely that of the dollar!

But for another, quoted by Jowett, it was more ethereal:

"This is the marvel of the motion pictures: it is art — democratic art, art for the races... There is no bar of language for the alien or the ignorant... here the masses of mankind enter through the rhythm of vivid motion, the light that flies before and the beauty that calls the spirit of the race... He begins to feel a brother in a race that is led by many dreams."

When dreams appeared on the silver screen, the detractors began their attacks on the content of the movies. The content was "immoral and offensive to public taste".

In the decades that followed various factions became embroiled in a losing

battle that cost time, money and human resources. Jowett's appraisal and analysis of this period is admirable. Despite his lack of primary sources his evidence is unquestioned. Jowett the historian is never overpowered by Jowett the movie-lover. The temptation to succumb must have been attractive. In reading this section one is appalled by the facts. "It's not," one might exclaim, "that they were blind, but how could they be so stupid?"

The paradox or bittersweetness of this history is the dilemma the mature audience is caught in. Because film is democratic the real audience is constantly in jeopardy. As the industry and art grew, lesser people tried to chop it down. When attendance was at its height (90 million per week in 1930) the Depression was at hand. Movies were essential to life in the early '40s, but there was a war on. When the war finished, 1946 saw 1.7 billion dollars spent by patrons — then the industry lost touch with the public. At that point it did not seem likely that moviegoing would become an institution in our freedom-of-choice society.

This brings us to the "democratic art". Simplistically, democratic society is maintained, for better or worse, by pressure groups. Movies flourish in the last of the capitalist countries — the USA. What is studied in this work is the "democratic art" in a capitalistic society. And it is a democratic art, in this framework. This means that it is shaped by groups that can afford to organize and exert pressure in a political manner.

The concept of film as the "art of the masses", "folk art" or the "people's art" has become rather doubtful. Jowett conveys this through his research. Yet supporters of this democratic art theory were eloquent in their day and described a vision rather than the reality. Jowett sums it up:

"The concept of the motion pictures as a 'democratic art' received a great deal of attention in the United States, but the realization of this dream was never achieved through the commercial film industry. Perhaps it was unrealistic to expect it in the first place!"

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