

Motion Picture Education

By
ERNEST A. DENCH

*Author of "Making the Movies," "Playwriting
for the Cinema," "Advertising by
Motion Pictures"*



NEW YORK
PUBLIC
LIBRARY

CINCINNATI
THE STANDARD PUBLISHING COMPANY

II

STIMULATING IMAGINATION BY MOTION PICTURES

THE eye plays an important part in present-day education, but it has not yet been brought up to the efficiency point. Books and slides whet the imagination, but fail to completely satisfy the same. Not so with the motion picture, however. Why are youngsters of all ages so fond of going to the movies? It is because they are able to see things as they are.

The average city-dweller's child has a very vague idea of the beauties of the countryside, for some parents are not well off enough to send their offspring to the green meadows, hills and woods. These are practically like foreign lands to them, but present these things in motion pictures and they will grasp every little detail so readily that it proves as good as visiting the places presented. The city child would in no time be wise as his country cousin,

MOTION PICTURE EDUCATION

especially in regard to the haunts and habits of wild animals and birds.

A friend of mine, teaching in England, recently told me a story anent a pupil who had seen a film covering England's largest county. "I always thought that Yorkshire was a red piece of land," the boy remarked. "Why?" asked his teacher. "Because it is shown on the map in red."

Facts such as the above, when presented in motion pictures, would leave an indelible impression.

The motion picture affords an extensive insight in regard to the different races—what they are like, how they live, industries, etc.

The following is an extract from a letter I received from a girl of fourteen: "Motion pictures are better to the schoolchildren than geography books because it is easy for them to understand and they can see the places described. People do not have to travel to see beautiful places and scenes, but they can see them on the film."

The study of literature is made harder by some of the classics having to be read over more than once in order to sense the story. But let a grade first read the book

MOTION PICTURE EDUCATION

and then show them the photoplay version, which will only take about an hour to project on the screen, and they will know the characters completely and master the story without the least difficulty.

In regard to poetry, an author often digs deep and introduces phrases which are like Greek to the average scholar. But if a poem is presented in motion pictures, as a great many have been, each verse preceding the visualization will be shown on the screen, destroying all doubt on the subject.

Motion pictures sharpen the brain of a child, make it move quicker, and allow things to be grasped which were previously beyond its mental capacity. All this is done without "cramming."

III

WHAT THE FREE-LANCE HAS DONE FOR THE EDUCATIONAL FILM

WITHOUT the free-lance writer our magazines and periodicals would lose a great deal of their interest.

The photoplay producers, being business men, have followed the lines of least resistance. In saying this, however, I do not wish to reflect upon a body of upright men. They started out with the idea of entertaining the masses, so they naturally turned their attention to comedy and dramatic stories. With the passing of time, their product began to show signs of improvement, and a superior type of patron favored the movie theater, while the old stagers were gradually educated up to the point of appreciating more substantial fare than pure romance.

Europe was first to cater to this demand by producing short educationals. These covered natural history, native customs, popular science, industries and floriculture.

VIII

THE MOTION-PICTURE NEWSPAPER AS AN EDUCATOR

WHILE there are thousands of newspapers published, from Maine to California, there are but several animated newspapers. They possess a great advantage over their press contemporaries in that they are not localized—they cover the important news events of the world. Condensation, therefore, is brought down to a fine art, for all this huge stretch of territory is covered each week in two thousand feet of film, taking about half an hour to run off the screen.

Like regular newspapers, the newsies of the movies have representatives in a town of any importance, and, as they have some sort of an arrangement with their British contemporaries, they are able to cover other continents.

The work of the topical cinematographer is not easy. Indifferent weather may handi-

MOTION PICTURE EDUCATION

cap him; a permit may not be obtainable; there is competition to reckon with; he has to work in trying places and there are inquisitive crowds to be handled diplomatically. Under all these conditions he has to grind out the regulation sixteen pictures a second—the results will be farcical, otherwise. I well remember seeing an English royal procession film. The coaches and guards proceeded at a racing pace, instead of in the usual dignified way. The audience simply roared with laughter. The operator in this case must have lost his head and turned the crank slower, for this gives the reverse results when photographed.

When the negative is developed, it is edited by the picture editor, who cuts out the dead parts, prepares and inserts the descriptive titles and boils down each item to its relative importance.

The motion picture is far better for teaching children what is going on than the ordinary newspaper, which often abounds with crime stories and other stuff objectionable to children. To sift out the bad from the good involves much time and trouble, and even then the lesson is apt to prove dry

MOTION PICTURE EDUCATION

to the pupil, for much is left to the imagination.

But appeal to the eye with the help of a news motion picture, and a child will sit up and take notice. He will readily become familiar with prominent persons; see the havoc wrought by the European war; know the meaning of "preparedness," and so on. From their own lips children have told me that they have also learned how foundation-stones are laid, the launching of battleships and the damage done by accidents.

The animated newspapers are also doing good work in the history field, for all events as they occur are preserved for the benefit of posterity, so that future generations will know what we were like.

Even to-day, when a prominent person dies, the animated newspapers unearth a film and include same in the regular edition. President Wilson, for instance, was pleased to be presented, after his wife's death, with a film taken at a garden party at which Mrs. Wilson was present.

Any film-exchange is at liberty to hire any topical desired, for a moderate fee, the amount of which decreases with the age of the film.

IX

THE SHORTCOMINGS OF PHOTOPLAY ADAPTED LITERATURE

LITERATURE and the photoplay are closely allied to each other, for by the former we read, while by the other the words are visualized into actions.

More than ever the printed page is being drawn into the ever-gobbling net of the film. Many of the great classics have been adapted, others are in preparation, and fiction authors are reaping harvests by selling the film production rights of their novels and short stories.

On the other hand, we hear complaints of the harm done as the result of the photoplay encroaching on the realm of fictiondom. It is certain that a thing can not do good to some without hitting others, yet the harm done, fortunately, is practically nil.

First we have the libraries, who assert that there has been a big decrease in the demand for modern fiction. It is certain

XI

THE LIMITATIONS OF MOTION PICTURE EDUCATION

VERSATILE as the motion picture is, it is powerless to perform the impossible. There is no such thing in this wide world elastic enough to be employed for every conceivable thing and occasion, so when we come down to the problem of applying the motion picture to education, we also find obstacles in our path.

That is precisely why it can not oust the teaching methods at present in vogue—it can never be more powerful than a competent assistant.

The best and most practical plan is for the teacher to give the lesson first in the ordinary way, then to arrange for the exhibition of the film or films covering the subject under notice. The picture should not be shown as at the photoplay theater, but the teacher, instead, should lecture on it and draw the attention of the pupils to the

MOTION PICTURE EDUCATION

most vital points. In a film scene these are quite apt to be overlooked among the multitude of details. A lantern would also further facilitate matters in enabling explanatory slides to be projected while the film is stopped at the necessary places, for film views can not be shown in a stationary position. The one disadvantage of the motion picture is that you can not elaborate on any point, for it changes over to another too quickly.

There is danger, in the speeding-up methods governing the presentation of different subjects in film form, of trying to cram too much into a child's brain at one time. Some pupils possess greater intelligence than others, so I recommend not showing another picture until the preceding one has been mastered. At this stage the lights could be switched on and the pupils questioned, or assigned a composition.

There might also arise a tendency on the part of pupils to grow lazy, when they have knowledge imparted in such a simple and pleasant way. This can be promptly dealt with, should the situation be noticeable, by threats to cut off the motion-picture lessons. No pupil would want that to be

MOTION PICTURE EDUCATION

done, so it should create much more enthusiasm among the pupils in their other lessons. English was generally thought to be one of the out-of-bounds subjects, but I want to set on record here that the motion picture is really of great help in this direction. The letter I recently received from a girl of fourteen proves this. This is what she said: "At the grammar school which I am attending, I had a course to write a composition from my schoolteacher about the red Indians. I had not heard very much about them, so it was not an easy task. One Saturday afternoon I went to a motion-picture show and saw a picture of some Indians. They were having war with some settlers that had settled in some part of the country. I saw how they fought, how they decorated themselves, how they earned their living and how they lived. It was a strange sight to see these redskins, but I soon came to know what kind of people they were, and I finished my composition in good shape. This is the reason why I could write my composition."

But while the cinematograph is not so superior as is the text-book in getting over facts, it can impart a deeper meaning and

MOTION PICTURE EDUCATION

relieve them of any dryness. Take, for instance, the Declaration of Independence. The events that led up to it could be shown, and appropriately closed with the historical incident itself.

In regard to history and geography, it is a great pity that the photographic difficulties debar the filming of the interiors of historic buildings and such things as caves, for frequently the most interesting things are to be found under cover. In these details the teacher must fall back on lectures and text-books,

XXI

THE MOTION-PICTURE POSTER MENACE

THE plea for better motion pictures should be extended to posters. This struck right home recently, for I have a married friend who, preferring to act as her own censor, always accompanies her children when they attend a motion-picture theater. Not because the law in New York forbids children under the age of sixteen being admitted without a parent or guardian, but owing to the fact that her offspring can not be trusted to keep away from undesirable shows. All a child has to do to evade the law is to wait in the lobby for some not overparticular senior to take him in.

Before the mother had taken this necessary precaution her youngsters had gotten into the habit of attending any motion-picture show that appealed to them. It was hard to get them to distinguish between right and wrong, so it came about that they were fed on a photoplay diet of blood-

MOTION PICTURE EDUCATION

curdling melodramas and suggestive comedies.

We knew that this was the case, because one day Will attempted to choke Alice, trussed her up like a barnyard chicken, and forced her to lie in the same position for hours. When their mother superintended their motion-picture visits, this sort of thing stopped for awhile.

One sunny Saturday Will joined a picnic party, one of whom, a little girl, fell into the lake. She was rescued by a young man, who was unable to restore her to consciousness. Will, however, applied first aid and revived her, and when we learned of his good deed we asked him how it was he had a knowledge of first aid.

"Oh, I saw it done at the movies," was Will's prompt explanation, which went to prove that if the right kind of pictures is shown, only good can result.

Shortly after this incident, Will dug a pit in the garden and was only prevented in the nick of time from covering Alice with earth.

The next day Will's mother was passing one of the nickeldromes she had banned, and noticed a group of children glancing at

MOTION PICTURE EDUCATION

the sensational posters. Among the youngsters was her Will, and, as she discovered his source of inspiration, she promptly placed the theater out of bounds.

What posters are fit for children to see? I consider these to be artistic creations, containing nothing sensational or suggestive. Perhaps the best method is that adopted by one of the leading photoplay-producing concerns, whose posters comprise several well-balanced photographs of the leading scenes, with an appropriate border.

The better-class theaters, however, rely mostly upon a lobby display of stills; that is, photographs taken when the photoplay was put on.

A photograph can not lie, but the poster artist may permit his imagination to run riot and misrepresent a perfectly desirable production.

XXII

CAPITALIZING NOTORIETY IN MOTION PICTURES

I WOULD be among the first to complain were the photoplay director to discard his excellent "realism first" slogan, but, like a good many other things, this (the photoplay's greatest asset) is at times sadly abused.

What is the dividing-line between realism and over-realism? In my opinion, it is perfectly proper for a director to stage an elaborate train wreck, because such an incident is liable to happen in real life and only the question of dollars is involved. But once he causes the hero to make a parachute leap from the top of the Statue of Liberty to the icy depths of the Hudson below, a human life is placed in danger.

We fans do not care for sensation for sensation's sake alone. We certainly admire the heroic deeds of the performers, but we do not like to see them carried to excess.

MOTION PICTURE EDUCATION

We can shut our eyes to a faked effect, but each director seems to try to outdo the other in putting over hair-raising feats. Why do they do it?

You do not find Mary Pickford, Lillian Walker, or like well-known players, associated with much daredeviltry. The truth is that the performers who take these chances are not actors at all; they are merely acrobats.

For a fee these "doubles," in which capacity they usually act, will carry out practically any stunt. They do not care a jot for police interference; in fact, they relish it because of the publicity—publicity of the kind which reflects discredit on the motion-picture industry. One performer who made a dive from Brooklyn Bridge was rescued from the North River by a police squad in boats. He was arrested and charged with disorderly conduct.

These stunts are not carried off without personal injury; indeed, sometimes death results. But once they have recovered, they are off for adventures new.

It was only by a miracle that one of these daredevils was saved from certain death in endeavoring to travel through the

MOTION PICTURE EDUCATION

Whirlpool Rapids, near Niagara Falls. He steered over the gorge safely, but when he arrived at the outer edge of the Whirlpool his engine refused to work. For five hours he drifted around in the treacherous waters, fearing that every moment would prove his last. The boat began to leak, and it was dark before the searchers, with powerful searchlights, brought him safely to land.

I know of a man who, for a substantial fee, was willing to leap from the Eiffel Tower in Paris. When the time came, he found his parachute was not in good shape, and wanted to give up the stunt. The director, however, would accept no excuse, so the man made the leap at a fearful pace, which resulted in his death. The camera man actually recorded his mangled remains for insertion in the film.

What effect do these films have on the morbid-minded? One film company recently received a letter from an ambitious actor who was willing to leap from the tower of the Woolworth Building.

Unfortunately, there is a darker side. A Philadelphia man, inspired to emulate the movie feats he had seen, and obsessed by the desire to have his accomplishment brought

MOTION PICTURE EDUCATION

to the notice of producers, plunged from the Brooklyn Bridge. His dive—216 feet—was a record one, but before attempting it he told his wife and friends of his intention. At first it seemed as though his plan would be interfered with, for, when he stood in the center of the main span, two policemen rushed to stop him. The man, however, climbed up one of the cables, from which position he made his dive. His dead body was recovered from the river several days later.

Another kind of notoriety is employing the motion picture to exploit actual criminal cases. Suppose some crook or burglar is the talk of the hour. He will doubtless be persuaded by some unscrupulous film producer, for a consideration, to re-enact his crime for the film. The criminal hopes to influence public opinion, while the fly-by-night producer thinks only about piling up his bank roll.

Sometimes the boot is on the other foot. This occurred in the case of Mrs. Florence Carmen. Her trial expenses amounted to \$20,000, so somebody spread the report that she intended to portray the Bailey tragedy in a film.

MOTION PICTURE EDUCATION

When asked for her reasons against appearing in vaudeville, Mrs. Carmen stated it was cheap and sensational, but she had sufficient good taste not to want to re-enact her crime on the film. Her ambition, she admitted, was to appear in a society role. It is a significant fact that no motion-picture producer came forward with a contract.

Some time ago a particularly unpleasant divorce case created a sensation in New Jersey. Corine, the wife, not only divorced her husband, Frank Hallack, without a motive, but also had him put in jail. Frank Hallack, to prove his innocence, declared at the time that he will be starred in a photoplay entitled "Trapped," which will depict everything from the time he met his wife until she divorced him.

Another way by which producers sometimes turn notoriety to profitable account is by putting on a photoplay after a sensational crime has been committed. The story of this is so much like the actual case that were the names of the characters not changed you would take it to be a reproduction of the crime itself.

An instance of this took place with the

