

IF PLATO WENT TO THE MOVIES

I SUPPOSE the worst thing (or perhaps the best) about being sick when you're a film critic is that you can't see any films to criticise. A literary critic can still read books, a music critic can still listen to the radio or the gramophone; but a film-reviewer without a theatre seat under him and a talkie screen in front of him is almost no use to anyone. However, although they can stop you seeing films, they can't stop you thinking about them. And what I've been thinking about is this:

If Plato were alive to-day and could have some experience of the cinema, what view would he be likely to take of it?

What suggested the idea to me was a passage in R. H. S. Crossman's *Plato To-day*, which I have just been reading in bed.

The passage which suggested to me Plato's relation to the cinema was that page in Crossman's book in which he is describing the technique which Plato advocated for controlling the "civilians" in his ideal republic—that is, the great

mass of the people, as distinct from the other two classes of "administrators" and "philosopher-kings." In Plato's view, the common man, being incapable of higher thought, must be fed on political and superstitious myths which appeal to his emotions and stimulate him to obey the law. These Plato calls "noble lies," by which, of course, he means propaganda. His "civilian" was to receive the same education as that prepared for the children of the ruling classes, but he was not to advance beyond that stage, since politically he would always be a child. And just as children are told improving or cautionary tales to stop them sucking their fingers, or biting their nails, or playing the wag, so Plato's "civilian" was to be served up with a succession of "noble lies" which would take his mind off the truth, keep him contented with the status quo, and prevent him from asserting his right to independence and self-government.

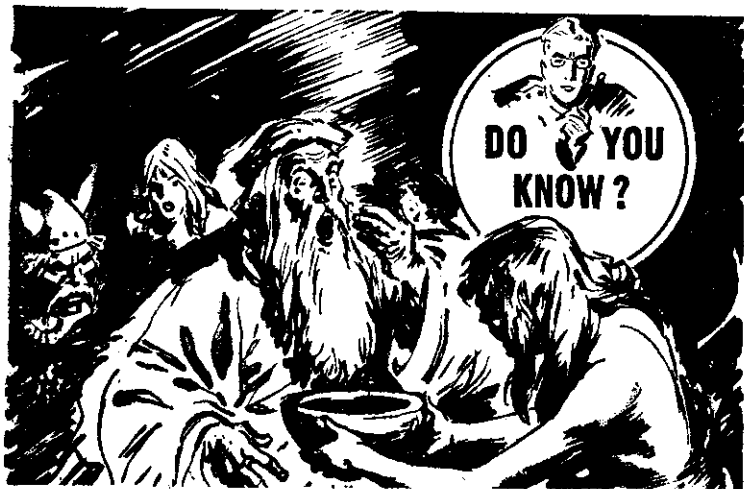
NOW perhaps you may be starting to see what all this has to do with the cinema—or am I carrying the idea

too far in suggesting that, if Plato were to visit a British or American movie theatre (always presuming that such a thorough-going Fascist were allowed in), he would find much therein to give him satisfaction? Let us concoct some pseudo-Platonic dialogue round the situation:

WE:—It has come to our knowledge that you have in the past few weeks been a regular visitor to several of our cinema theatres. Would you favour us with your impressions of an invention unknown in your day but which has become a most important factor in ours?

PLATO:—As you say, the scientific phenomenon of the cinema was unknown to my time, but the social principle upon which it operates was closely studied and highly regarded by those whose duty it was to ensure the well-being and contentment of the common people. If you have read my book *The Republic*, you will know I am referring to the so-called "noble lie," of which several of the films that I have seen recently appear to me to be worthy examples; though, without desiring to hurt your feelings, I must confess that I have, during my visits to several European countries in recent years, seen other instances where this technique has been brought down to a much finer art.

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YAWNING—CURE FOR TOOTHACHE! Ancient Druids gave the following cure for toothache: "for toothwark (toothache) if the worm eat the tooth, take an old holly leaf in one of the lower umbles of hartwort, and the upper part of sage, boil two doles in water, pour into a bowl and yawn over it. The worm shall then fall into the bowl".

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