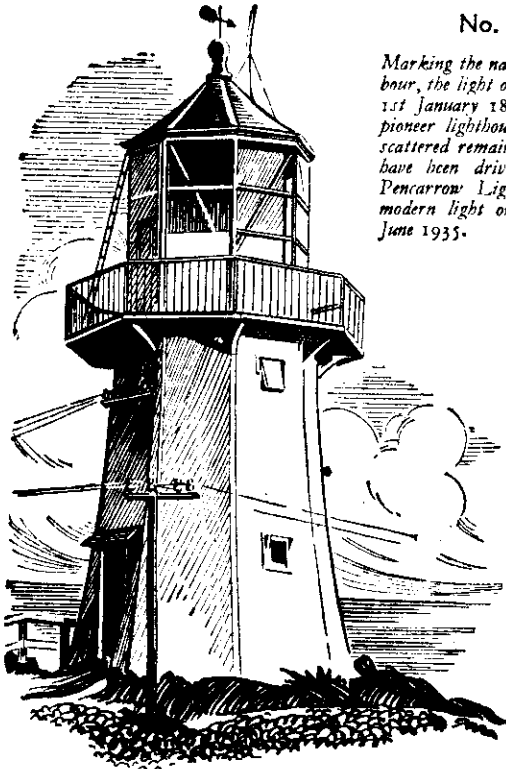


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Speaking Candidly, by G.M.

THE POWER OF THE CINEMA

SAN FRANCISCO, June 5: Members of the Screen Writers' Guild should use their wit and talent to ridicule Communism, said Mr. Eric Johnston, president of the Motion Picture Producers' Association, addressing 200 members of the Guild at Hollywood to-night. "I want to see it become a joke to be a Communist in America," he said. He added that Hollywood should set the pace for making more Americans proud of their own institutions and principles, including capitalism.—Cable message.



ERIC JOHNSTON
He supplies the text

THAT statement by Eric Johnston, ex-president of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, successor to Will Hays and the most influential figure in American movies to-day, caught my attention just as I was sitting down to write this review of an important new book* on the influence of the film. It strikes me as being, in the circumstances, a singularly apposite text, because Mr. Mayer's opening paragraph reads: "My studies on political parties have always kept alive in me a deep interest in films, for it seemed to me that the emotional, non-rational impact of films, particularly of feature films, shaped in the widest sense political opinions." And later the author, a political scientist and sociologist of some note (he is lecturer in sociology at the London School of Economics), says this: "One need only study the influence of films and 'political propaganda' which the National Socialist Party used in Germany before and after 1933 to realise the enormous potentialities of visualisation in the formation of 'political' beliefs, or of any beliefs."

In the light of this, it is the latter part of Mr. Johnston's clarion call to the Screen Writers' Guild which impresses me most. A little ridiculing of communism by Hollywood would probably prove not unacceptable to many people and would, in any case, be no new thing (remember *Ninotchka* and *Red Salute?*). But Mr. Johnston goes considerably beyond this and urges the use of the film to bolster up American "institutions and principles, including capitalism." True, the Russians have always done this sort of thing and been quite frank about it. ("The cinema is for us the most important of all the arts," said Lenin in 1918.) Their films have consistently sold communism and ridiculed capitalism; but so long as we don't see any Russian films the point is of academic interest only. On the other hand, at least two-thirds of the films shown here originate in the U.S.A., and this point is therefore of considerably more than academic interest. Screen plays designed to inculcate certain political ideas and allegiances among Americans (which is, of course, their own affair) will also be inculcating the same ideas and allegiances among the peoples of many other countries—and that, I suggest, is very much the affair of those peoples and their governments whether or not they now approve of American capitalism, but especially if they don't. They should be grateful to Mr. Johnston for putting them on their guard in the way he has done.

*SOCIOLOGY OF FILM: Studies and Documents. By J. P. Mayer. Faber and Faber Ltd., London.

ALL the same, though Mr. Johnston has told us precisely what to look for in forthcoming Hollywood films, has he, in fact, made it much easier for us to find it? Students of the cinema such as J. P. Mayer have long been convinced that the film does exercise a profound political influence but they have lacked, and still lack, any scientific method of recognising it, and thus of producing precise evidence of the manner in which, often perhaps without deliberate intention by the film producer, this influence operates. The difficulty arises largely because there exists no comprehensive analysis of the content of modern motion-pictures (Dr. Dale's well-known survey along these lines covers only the films of the 1920-31 period, and is therefore well out-of-date).

Yet, says Mayer, "what is really important to the sociologist is the discovery and isolation of the implicit attitudes of a motion-picture, the general assumptions on which are based the conduct of the characters, and the treatment of the situations of the plot." However, now that Hollywood is emerging as a self-confessed apologist for capitalism and the American "way of life" perhaps some State authorities as well as the sociologists will be interested in discovering just what are the salient characteristics and the standards of value implicit in the average Hollywood movie.

THE political influence of the cinema is only one aspect of the subject which interests Mayer in this book. It is, he is careful to emphasise, no more than a preliminary survey for a much fuller and more detailed study of the cinema which is now in process of publication, and from which "it will become evident that films (to be more precise, feature films) exert the most powerful influence in our lives, an influence which in all probability is stronger than that wielded by press and radio. The nature of this influence. . . is a moral one. Value patterns, actual behaviour, the outlook on life generally, are manifestly shaped by film influences." However,

(continued on next page)