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ME AND THE FILMS

Material For Argument

Written For "The Listener" By S.B.

I LOVE going to the pictures. It's such an easy way of sitting down. Reading books is such hard work. Your eyes have to go back and forward along the lines and your mind has to piece together the words into phrases and sentences and work out the sense of it all. It's all very tiring—thinking it all, I mean. So these days, when my favourite radio serial is not on the air, I like to go to the pictures. There you just sit and the screen throws things at you and presses all your different emotion buttons without any need for effort on your part.

The other day I was worried as could be about a family I know. The man and his wife rent a room for thirty-five bob. They have a child aged about eight and another aged about one year. The child sleeps with the father and the baby with the mother. The child has spots on its face and the baby has distentions over its eyebrows, which means pellagra or beri beri or rickets, or something else no baby should have.

There was nothing for me to do but go to the pictures and after that it seemed all right.

That same week I was reading all about life in the air-raid shelters in London. It was rather frightening to think of all those people twisted out of normalcy and being good-humoured about it. There was a photograph of a woman weeping on a shattered doorstep, and the caption said how brave everyone was and with what fortitude people like this were surviving the cruel raids.

However, I went to the pictures and had my sex complex smoothed over.

Thoughts on Guy Fawkes' Day

Then, later, it was Guy Fawkes' Day. I thought it a very fine thing that Hitler should be the guy. The more hate we develop among our children the better, I thought. The better for us and the worse for Hitler and the next generation of Germans. Poor old Guy Fawkes himself seemed to be quite forgotten in all the processions and bonfire lighting.

This made me sad. I remembered that in my day to burn the guy was as good as burning down the school building or throwing a stone at teacher from behind a hedge. We had the idea then that it was a pity that Guy had not succeeded in his enterprise of blowing up Parliament; and it was a healthy instinct, the same that made us play hockey when the plums were ripe in February, down in the orchard by the river where the trout were fat.

But it was no use feeling sad about these things, so I went to the pictures and had my ego agitated.

There is a prescription for everything at the pitchers.

General to the Particular

You might not think a near-quota-grade film like one of Elstree's filmings of one of A. E. W. Mason's novels would be an important social document; and yet I found it so the other day. It was before the time of the U.S.A. presidential elections, or Beau Vite's defeat in the Melbourne Cup, or the union quarrel on the South Island Main Trunk, but I know I had something on my mind.



"... Whether your shout is stupid or sensible, if it is a good loud shout, repeated often, it will be heard"

This film, which was something about the "house of the arrow," was very much the same as the last one, except that the characters were killed off in a different order. Inspector Hanaud was the same, he set the same trap for the murderer, and arrived once again on the scene only just in time to save the heroine.

They Are Important

The pictures have the status of sixpenny thrillers or of soap opera on the radio, except that it is easier to sit through them than to read a thriller or listen to a broadcast serial. But they are important socially, nevertheless, as you shall shortly see, I am just beginning to get serious.

Their big trouble from the point of view of the ordinary critic, is their failure to measure up to the standards of modern detective fiction. In the really good Dorothy Sayers book (or Ngaio Marsh book, to be patriotic), the author can set a problem into a series of disguises that demand the reader's close attention. But on the screen everything must be open to the public gaze. Since it is difficult to film the clues and characters so that the audience can participate in the detective puzzle, without giving everything away, the film-makers have to resort to cheating.



"... A collection of ignorant peasants"

Hanaud is Like Hitler

Hanaud, especially, with his love of mysterious omnipotence, gives us the feeling that we should after all rather like to be Hitler. Like Hitler, Hanaud allows no one to share in the solution of his problems. That is a matter only for his own quirks of imagination and his own God-like perspicacity. All we have to do is view the corpse.

My own opinion, achieved during those few moments which this modern soporific leaves us to think, is that this stuff is just not worth bothering about, except that we should all bother about it enough to take verbal daggers and slay it right and left.

It is made either to fill quotas or to justify the theory that film-goers go to films to be soothed into a happy state of mental vacuity. In more general terms, as fast as our educators try to stimulate free thinking, our entertainers, on the screen, on the radio, in the printed word, do their worst to kill it or stifle it or drug it out of live existence.

What the People Want

The supposition, I suppose, is on the lines of the proposition put to Christ in Dostoevski's "Brothers": that the majority of the people do not want freedom or independence in thought—only food, drink, pleasure, and some place to live. Give them these things, and you have all power over them. It just so happens that men who are not Christs can assume the same powers. And it just so happens that because they are not Christs they do assume them, and like it. Like Inspector Hanaud they are then in the position to do all the thinking, and it does not matter if they are wrong because there is no one to criticise them. And Inspector Hanaud, as I have reminded you before, is only a jovial version of Hitler.

The danger is that these powers are very easily secured. Whether your shout is stupid or sensible, if it is a good loud shout, repeated often, it will be heard, and it will be echoed. And once you are on top it is the most difficult thing in the world to climb down again, however good your intentions may be. Napoleon III. was very well intentioned. But he wanted power badly, and sooner or later the French gave it to him, because the French did not drink beer and eat beef and were liable to do such things more than the British, in those days before there was a BBC, or a NBS, or a CBS, or a Hollywood, or an Elstree. Then he tried to give back to the people some of the power he had had to take from them to get where he was, and, of

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