

Hollywood and the Television Age

"MOTION pictures are entering their third major era. First there was the silent period. Then the sound era. Now we are on the threshold of the television age. . . I predict that within just a few years a great many Hollywood producers, directors, writers and actors who are still coasting on reputations built up in the past are going to wonder what hit them." In these words in an article called *Hollywood in the Television Age*, published in the *New York Times* in February, 1949, Samuel Goldwyn drew attention to a new situation that had arisen in the glittering arena of American entertainment. Someone called it "The Battle of the Century, Movies v. Television."

Since the war, television in the United States has grown remarkably fast. Today there are six million television set owners in the country, and their number is skyrocketing. Indeed, the recent falling-off in film attendances in the States has been blamed partly on the activities of the television companies.

So television has become recognised as an ever-growing threat to the motion-

picture industry's "longevity, importance, and income." What are the film companies doing about it? Their immediate reaction has been in the form of a boycott. They have been keeping their films off the television networks, forbidding their stars to appear in television, and buying up the most promising television talent. But it seems likely that falling film revenues—if they continue to fall—may make the movie big shots try to effect some sort of compromise. A number of picture theatres have recently closed down in the States, 580 in the past six months, out of a total of about 20,000, partly because of television's competition.

Theatre Television

ONE of the movie industry's biggest counters so far has been theatre television. The head of 20th Century-Fox, Spyros Skouras, believes he can outbid the television interests for rights to sports events, operas, and Broadway shows, and that if these are put on to replace the second features on the double bills of most American cinemas, they will be good enough to attract customers away from their home television sets. People are gregarious, Goldwyn says, and a demonstration of large-

screen television is at present being held in 20 Los Angeles theatres to decide whether theatre television will be extended to some of the major theatre networks.

The 20th Century-Fox organisation is, however, also devoting part of its studio facilities to the making of films for television in the home—a number of small independents are already devoting their whole time to this. It is a compromise answer to television's main weapon in the battle—phonevision.

Phonevision

A SURVEY of 3000 television set owners revealed that whereas 32 per cent would be willing to pay the average box-office price to see television on a theatre screen, 50 per cent were willing to pay a dollar to see a first-run movie on their home sets. On this basis one company has decided to make a three-month test of phonevision. All that the new system involves is a telephone call by the set owner, ordering a film for the evening, on his own set, at a dollar a time. This is made possible by an inexpensive gadget attached to his set. The fee is charged to the monthly phone bill, and divided among the producer of the film, the television

BAROMETER

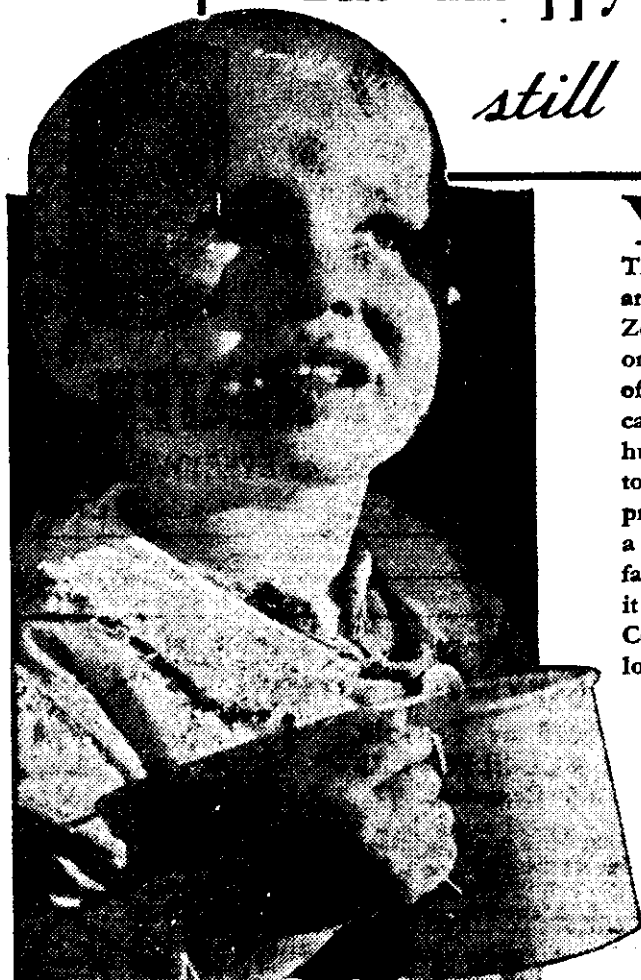
OVERCAST: "Key to the City."

station, and the telephone company. The scheme is also expected to make it profitable for Hollywood to turn out high quality films solely for television, and is thought to have far bigger potential profits than the country's 20,000 picture theatres.

In an editorial in *Life* magazine, it was said that if the phonevision experiment succeeds, E. F. McDonald, Jr., its sponsor, will go down in history as a great social innovator: "His system promises to complete the process, already stimulated by television itself, whereby the rolling, wandering American of the motor age is being returned to the home. With a new movie every night to keep the children from their books and piano lessons, it may not be the kind of home a reflective parent wants to live in. Nevertheless, a new age may be just now a-borning. Sociologists take note."

In the meantime, and this is what the average filmgoer is presumably interested in, how will films themselves be affected? Goldwyn thinks television's competition will force Hollywood to produce better pictures. "It is a certainty that people will be unwilling to pay to see poor pictures when they can stay at home and see something which is, at least, no worse." Pictures designed specifically for television won't differ basic-

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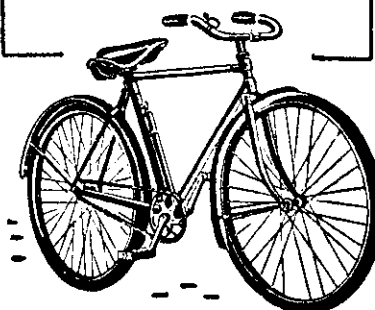
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