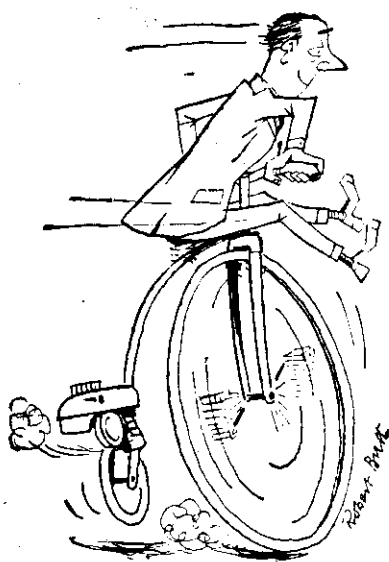




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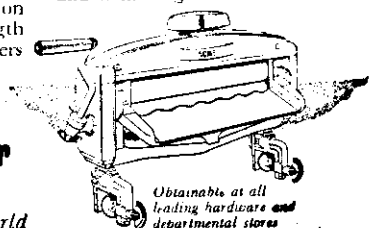


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Third Thoughts on 3-D

IT is several weeks since 3-D Day in New Zealand. Having by now had the chance to see three films in the polarised light technique and to make some observations of the reaction of audiences, including that of children, I have been invited to set down any second or third thoughts I may have on the subject of third-dimension in the cinema. Some of them will inevitably be the official thoughts of a film censor, but mostly they will be just the personal reflections of an individual who maintains his interest in films.

After seeing the first 3-D film I commented officially that "it seems clear that, at least at the outset, 'the shock-appeal' of the new technique is being played up." This statement produced a prompt reaction from a visiting American film executive who denied that Hollywood was doing anything of the sort. Without expressing any opinion on individual productions (which is something that, as Censor, I must of course not do), I must say that I have as yet found no good reason to vary my original view. Indeed, the film industry itself would seem to be doing its best, through its own publicity, to sustain this view—as witness the promise of "screaming terror" caused by "a monster who skulks in the shadows" which is held out to audiences by the trailer for a 3-D film produced by the visiting executive's own studio. There is emphasis on "living, creeping death" in the trailer for another film; and according to a third, the film it advertises is "terrifying in three dimensions."

To understand 3-D and its problems, possibilities, and limitations, one needs

The latest development in screen entertainment is discussed by the New Zealand Film Censor,



Spencer Digby photograph

GORDON MIRAMS

to understand clearly what caused 3-D in the first place. Hollywood's current production policy (so far as Hollywood can ever be said to have a policy) has something in common with American foreign policy. Just as the latter is primarily a reaction against communism, so the former is essentially a reaction against television.

The extent to which television is affecting the U.S. film industry, especially on the exhibiting side, was dramatically revealed by a paragraph in *Time* a week or so ago, quoting a spokesman for the Council of Motion Picture Organisations who said that business is "so desperately sick that if relief . . . is not immediately forthcoming the very existence of the industry will be imperilled." Admittedly this spokesman was piling on the agony in an effort to convince a committee of Congress of the need to wipe out Federal admission tax. However, some of the evidence submitted sounds impressive—for instance, that more than 5000 U.S. theatres have closed since the end of the war, and that another 5000 (out of a total of 18,000 still in operation at present) will close by the end of this year; that if U.S. exhibitors did not sell candy and popcorn as well as movies they would have lost nearly 150 million dollars last year; and that TV has cut cinema box-office receipts 40 per cent. in "saturated" areas and 22 per cent. in the "fringes."

Thus all the excitement over 3-D, all the claims and counter-claims about it, all the ingenious devices being predicted to change the face of film entertainment, can be reduced to this one basic fact—that television means bringing the movie screen out of the theatre and into the home. Because television reduces the size of the screen on which movies can be seen at home, and also because it can as yet only reproduce black-and-white images, Hollywood's reply to television's challenge has been to increase the size of the theatre screen and to improve the

effectiveness of the visual images. The film industry is employing various means to achieve this end, and so persuade the American public to continue going out to cinema theatres. It is making screens larger, giving them the illusion of depth (that is, third dimension, or stereoscopic vision), introducing panoramic effects and multiple sound recording and reproduction (so that voices and noises will be heard coming from points around the auditorium and not only from the direction of the screen); it is making more and more films in colour (black-and-white features may soon be in the minority), and it is making them increasingly spectacular and realistic. Inevitably perhaps, this has led Hollywood at the outset to concentrate on the type of story—often of the "horror" and "thriller" variety—which can stress the novel and exciting aspects of 3-D, so that from where you sit in the theatre bats seem to fly into your face, lions to leap into your lap, spears to be hurled at you, guns to explode under your nose, chorus girls to kick their legs over your head. How it will all settle down is at the moment almost anybody's guess; but it will need to settle down fairly soon or we may all become nervous wrecks with strained eyesight!

When the period of stunting abates, we shall be better able to judge whether these technological developments are going to offer film-makers greater scope for creative artistry. Because a film will soon be so lifelike that it will be able to offer us everything but smell, it cannot be assumed that it will be a work of art, capable of giving us a revelation of life. The third-dimensional film, as someone has said, may bring greater physical size to the screen but, in the realm of ideas, it has still to be proved that it will really bring greater depth. It might do just the opposite. Speaking as a film-lover rather than as a film censor, the danger as I see it with 3-D and its companion devices is that they might be used merely as "gimmicks" in order to increase the illusion of reality, and so to relieve us still further of the need for using our imaginations.

Dogmatic generalisations and prophecies have a nasty habit of coming back at you. But I shall risk a guess that, although without polaroid glasses it may never be possible to get more than a sense of third dimension, no system which requires the wearing of glasses is likely to be finally and permanently acceptable to picturegoers. I think, too, that Hollywood may fairly soon come to realise that it does not pay to scare its audiences too much—particularly young and the elderly people. Speaking now more as a censor (and perhaps an over-optimistic one), I feel that the introduction of three-dimension might do as much as almost anything could to make parents conscious of the impact of the cinema on children and so of the service in this direction which censorship tries to give through its certificates. As for the elderly, one cannot help wondering whether in a country like New Zealand, where Social Security pensioners form an appreciable section of patrons, matinee business may not be affected if Hollywood keeps on emphasising the "thrilling, chilling" possibilities of its new technique. It isn't easy to relax for a

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