

## THE CHRISTIAN CRITIC AND THE CINEMA

### A Personal View

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**D**ISCUSSION of the impact of Christian criticism on the cinema would be premature. Both are too new. 'The art of the film is not yet formed', Herbert Read wrote in his essay *Towards a Film Aesthetic* (helpfully reprinted in *The Cinema* 1951: Penguin Books; 2s. 6d.); 'and to theorise about something which is not yet fully in being may seem the height of pedantic indiscretion.' Without fixed principles, tradition or terms of reference, critics, like other members of the film body, are still making up the rules of their job as they go along doing it; and among them the Christian critic is a late starter. Conscientious Catholics for too many years have passed the cinema by, neglecting, either from fear of its evil or scorn of its stupidity, to learn the alphabet of the language of moving pictures.

Pope Pius XI saw the folly and danger of this attitude already in 1936. But the Catholic community responded slowly to the challenge of his encyclical on films, *Vigilanti Cura*. Only now is it possible to discern even the rough outlines of a body of Catholic film criticism. Last April, Christian film critics from all parts of the world gathered in Lucerne for a study conference arranged by the O.C.I.C. (Office Catholique Internationale du Cinéma). I keenly regret having been prevented at the last moment by illness from being present; for this was a first concerted attempt to define the principles and functions of Christian film criticism.

Readers of *BLACKFRIARS* will remember the Medieval Disputation on the Third Programme when the Very Reverend Hilary Carpenter defended his daring thesis that 'The Cinema is the Highest Form of Art', only finally conceding the addition of the word 'potentially'.

My personal view is that it is the film critic's duty to uphold a standard which recognises the cinema as potentially the highest form of art, and that the Catholic critic in particular has an important contribution to make to the potential conversion of the cinema into a Christian art. At this stage it may be useful to consider the prospects and the problems, the difficulties and the hopes for Christian film criticism.

The art-industry relation is the crucial paradox on which the cinema is based. How this dilemma affects criticism is seen in the two extremes of the film trade press and the 'highbrow' film press. Trade paper reviews are addressed solely to the industry and dictated at the box office, films being graded according to their audience-appeal in fascinating categories. 'Carriage trade' is a hopeful label, though it may be applied to the purely pretentious; 'family fare' may not be clever but is probably harmless; 'industrial booking only' is very sinister. Once the reader masters the jargon, these trade reviews offer very shrewd analyses of films.

Dedicated to the opposite pole of pure art are the self-consciously intellectual journals, the cinema's aesthetes. In between the two, the ordinary professional critic tries to find some balance between art, industry, personal taste or conscience, and the entertainment of his readers in a minimum of space. Democratic snobbery operates against critical leadership or guidance, by accusations of being 'out of touch with the public'.

Christian film critics are subject to the same difficulties and contradictions which confound their colleagues, accentuated by the additional problems attendant on living and working in a non-Catholic, almost un-Christian community. Organised Christian influence has hitherto come through two bodies which reflect the art-industry dilemma. The Catholic-led American Legion of Decency, trying to protect the public, aims at the industry through the box office; the *Revue Internationale du Cinéma*, quarterly organ of the O.C.I.C., offers constructive film criticism on the highest level. Trying to strike a balance somewhere between the two is *Focus*, the modest organ of the Catholic Film Institute in Britain; its priest-reviewers strive gallantly for the popular touch, trying to combine their correct moral judgments with a decent standard of popular entertainment.

Criticism is, of course, not the purpose of the Legion of Decency. It has even been suggested that one reason for the inadequate American support of the International Film Review may be the Legion's view that aesthetic criticism is no part of its business.

Much may be said for the Legion's deliberate self-limitation to a policy of censorship for the faithful and a liaison service with the studios to help prevent the necessity of censorship. But there is a danger that the literal list of taboos and stipulations, which is the most the Legion can hope to impose on the industry's Johnson

Office, may be reduced to artistic absurdity and ridicule. Often we see a film flout the intention of a Johnson Code ruling for seven-eighths of its length, and in the last reel reform with wild improbability to suit a ruling that crime must not pay, or divorce provide a happy ending, or that virtue must triumph. All the audience feels is that the ending is false. An extreme case was *Paid in Full*, where a fundamentally immoral plot was put through grotesque moral contortions to make it appear to conform to Code. And it is a pity the Legion's strictly censorial and otherwise uncritical status should be so widely misunderstood.

A leading British film authority once said to me that he would have no further respect for the American film Catholics' judgment since they had given their backing to *Joan of Arc*, which was a so palpably bad film—the modern Technicolor *Joan of Arc* of course, not Dreyer's silent classic. The modern *Joan of Arc* was indeed a model of the disaster that can come from concentrating on the letter of the script rather than the spirit of the cinema.

A purely censorial body must always be needed to represent the Churches. But it should not have the effect of excluding an organ of higher criticism like the *International Film Review*. Indeed, it is a disgrace to English-speaking Catholics that support should not be adequate to continue the English edition of this publication, where learned and leading Catholics from most countries, approaching the cinema without condescension, have taken the trouble to learn its craft. As a result of Anglo-American (and Spanish) indifference, only the French edition is now available of this, the most enlightened and stimulating journal of film criticism that I know.

Individual Catholic critics and their problems must be divided into two main groups: critics of the Catholic Press, and film critics who happen also to be Catholics.

To us in the latter group the problems of the former seem enviably simplified. What a relief it must be to be free to invoke familiar dogma and authority for deploring the muddled morals of most films, and openly to apply Christian standards of morality. Such indulgence is denied to the majority of critics on commercial papers. Very occasionally a well-established leading critic may invoke the broadest kind of Christianity in support of an opinion. But few would risk it even if inclined. On the whole our readers would be as surprised as our editors if we offered

moral or religious grounds for any of our judgments. It would, of course, be impossible in most cases to take a stand on, say, the treatment of divorce in a film very far wide of that of most of one's readers. (Once, on a paper for which I wrote at the time, I was even warned against the dangers of implying moral judgments and told the readers did not care!) So in general we must translate moral opinions into terms of taste, and hope at best to establish a relationship of confidence with our readers where the latter, though not agreeing with all our opinions, will believe that they are rooted in a sound sense of values.

J. L. Tallenay, editor of the French *Radio-Ciné*, partially acknowledged this dilemma in his analysis which formed a basis for the discussions in Lucerne. Recognising that 'a film is compelled for economic reasons to be showable to all kinds of people and [as] this public is today un-Christian', he emphasised that 'the ideal of the Christian critic is not to address himself to believers only. Other people may be interested in the opinion of a critic whose criticisms are based on the solid foundations of Christianity.'

Tallenay touched on most of the problems which plague both the Catholic critic and the critic who is a Catholic. His twin demons of 'aesthetic formalism' and 'moral formalism' endanger both groups in varying degrees. Conscientious Christians who come to the business of criticism without previous study of the cinema are no doubt more vulnerable to 'moral formalism'—to the danger of approving a film that 'in no point offends the established standard, yet is possibly disastrous as a whole'—and to the attendant danger of judging by a purely literal or literary standard and so missing the point of the medium. 'Systematic stupidity and vulgarity in a film', emphasised Tallenay, 'can be as dangerous as immorality.'

It is my personal view that *at the present stage* both of the cinema and of Christian criticism, 'aesthetic formalism' is the lesser danger. None of us, of course, may subscribe unreservedly to 'art for art's sake', but, by a paradox which Maritain describes in *Art and Scholasticism*, unless the artist works for the moment as though his art were all, his only thought being to achieve something beautiful or well made, there will be no art. There is a critical equivalent to this paradox in that unless the critic's professional and artistic integrity convinces, his moral integrity will fall flat.

Those who attended the Lucerne conference agreed that the crux proved to be the problem of the film that is artistically good but morally objectionable. An almost perfect example is Max Ophuls's *La Ronde*; highly improper, profoundly cynical, but exquisitely made and acted. As a Catholic I may find its theme—the roundabout of desire—distasteful, its cynicism repugnant; it would be a betrayal of my honesty as a film critic to do less than marvel at its workmanship. Pretence—as I have seen at least one Christian critic pretend—that because a film is shocking it is stupid, dull and indifferent, reflects no credit on Christian criticism.

If the cinema were older and could boast more masterpieces; if the school of Christian criticism, which is barely beginning to take shape, were a little further advanced and better accustomed to deal in works of art, it would be easier for all of us to see frivolities like *La Ronde* on the one hand in their true perspective, or on the other, monumental cinematic banalities like *Joan of Arc*.

None of the older arts has developed without at least a period of powerful Christian influences. There can be no such period for the cinema without active Christians working in every branch of the cinema; and their efforts will be wasted unless they aim at the fullest possible development of this powerful medium which should carry ideas to millions with the combined force of poetry and music, painting and drama.

Long-term and indirect, their influence is bound to be. As Andrew Buchanan, the documentary director who works so nobly for a Christian cinema and even (although not himself a Catholic) for the Catholic Film Institute, says in his little book for the young, *Going to the Cinema*: 'in time, when there are enough people like you with sound knowledge about films, programmes will become better and better in order to satisfy you'. There is the Christian critic's opportunity.

Buchanan is one of the most balanced and practical writers on the cinema. Throughout this book and his excellent practical handbook for beginners, *Film-making from Script to Screen* (Phoenix House; 8s. 6d.), shines his faith in the moving picture as a medium of still-unexplored richness. His use of the word 'craftsmen' is notable and comforting; notable because the usual arid word is 'technicians', comforting because the great cathedrals too were built by teams of craftsmen. To quote Maritain again: 'The

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cathedral builders had no sort of thesis in mind. . . . They did not want to demonstrate the propriety of Christian dogma or to suggest by some artifice a Christian emotion. They even thought very much less about making a thing of beauty than turning out good work. They had the Faith, and as they were, so did they work. Their achievement revealed God's truth, but without doing it on purpose, and because it was not done on purpose.'

'As they were, so did they work.' So the need is for more and more Christians to become cinema craftsmen—including critics. And the need for the Christian critic is to keep his eye on a standard of craftsmanship below which the cinema does not begin to live.

Pope Pius XI in *Vigilanti Cura* recognised the powers of the new medium and the need for Catholics to master it when he said, praising those who dedicate themselves to raising the standard of the motion picture to meet the requirements of the Christian conscience: 'For this purpose they must make full use of the technical ability of experts and not permit the waste of effort and of money by the employment of amateurs'. His Holiness said further: 'a force of such power and universality as the cinema can be directed . . . to the highest ends of individual and social improvement . . . it can and must be a bearer of light and a positive guide to what is good'.

Mr Buchanan's two books offer an admirable A.B.C. of cinema. Christians can afford, too, to learn of the medium from Soviet Communists, who developed it so early and recognised that for those with something to say only the cinema at its most powerful is good enough. All who can plough through the translation of Eisenstein's *Film Form* (Dobson; 18s. 6d.) will find it a revelation of the cinema's potentialities before which any scorn of this base art must yield to humility. The conclusion of the famous declaration by Eisenstein, Pudovkin and Alexandrov repays study: 'The Contrapuntal Method of constructing the sound film will not only weaken the International Cinema but will bring its significance to unprecedented power and cultural height. Such a method for constructing the sound-film will not confine it to a national market, as must happen with the photographing of plays, but will give a greater possibility than ever before for the circulation throughout the world of a filmically

expressed idea.' Meanwhile, as Mr Buchanan says: 'Religion is waiting to be properly interpreted and expressed in film'.

Unless Christians will conquer their suspicions of the cinema as a medium, and will get inside and crusade as craftsmen, the only function left to Christian film criticism will be the defensive, negative, necessary but defeatist, one of censorship.

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## THE TRADITION OF THE MARIES IN PROVENCE

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**F**EW local traditions of evangelisation have been maintained with as much tenacity and defended with as much passion as that of the Bethany household and the Maries in Provence. Among Catholics of the modern dioceses of Marseilles, Aix, Avignon and Fréjus, which have succeeded the medieval dioceses of the same churches and those of Orange, Carpentras, Apt, Arles and Toulon, now divided between the four survivors, the belief that their province was christianised by these Gospel figures is held with conviction and is still a source of devotion. Whereas elsewhere the name and legend of the first bishop are only matters of archaeology, in Provence the memory of Lazarus and his sisters, of Mary Salome and Mary the mother of James, is a living one, honoured by novena, procession and pilgrimage in the crypt of St Victor's abbey in Marseilles and in those of the churches of Tarascon, Saint-Maximin and Les Saintes Maries de la Mer, and in the cave sanctuary known as the Sainte-Baume.

The knowledge of this tradition comes generally as a surprise to English Catholics. Nevertheless, at least one episode of the series—that of Mary Magdalen's penance in the Sainte-Baume—has been frequently reproduced in works of art and provides, indeed the usual setting for fifteenth to nineteenth century paintings of the saint. For the rocky background against which so many pictures of her are placed is that of the cave near Marseilles where she is alleged to have dwelt for thirty years, expiating her early life of sin.

One's first movement on hearing of these legends is to shrug