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# THE CINEMA AND POPULAR

# CULTURE

Every citizen has an equal right to culture. The development of the
means of diffusion and of democratic ideas has unquestionably fur-
thered a trend toward the unification of culture, but this process is often
hindered and retarded. Profound disparities separate the cultural ideas
and practices of society, the ideal or real cultural models of different
social classes and categories, those of different groups, and, finally,
those of the leaders and of the public. Imbalances result from this, and
it is these imbalances that popular culture tends to modify. In order
best to meet the continuously new cultural needs of industrial and
democratic society, popular culture has adapted to modern life some of
the features of traditional culture. It has initiated the masses into the
elementary techniques of learning—writing and reading. An increas-
ingly complex and extended primary education has become more wide-
spread. Contemporary society raises problems that evolve so rapidly
and are so intricate that popular culture must be continued after school

Translated by Elaine P. Halperin

and during a man's entire life. It finds its way into new systems of permanent instruction and training through the agency of large-scale means of diffusion, by means of groups or social relationships.

What fresh resources does the cinema offer to popular culture? In our present situation it is important for the artist, the propagandist, or the educator to know what the various subjective standards of cinematic culture are. Through this he will be able to assess the distance between observed standards and those expected or desired by the conscious or unconscious artisans of popular culture.

But how can we ascertain these different levels scientifically? The polling of opinion by large-scale national sampling is useful but insufficient. To be sure, it does provide precise information about such simple facts as the cost of admission to motion-picture theaters or the public's favorite cinema star or film. But when it comes to analyzing more complex problems, such as, for instance, the function of motion pictures at different levels of cinematic culture, it becomes necessary to employ the methods of cultural sociology in order to achieve a representative, small-scale sampling of the population.

For this reason, UNESCO's international group of social scientists, who are working on the problem of leisure, decided, in 1956, to undertake a co-ordinated study of the role of leisure in the social and cultural evoluiton of an average city.[1] This research is based on samplings in Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Poland, Switzerland, Great Britain, Italy, and Yugoslavia. The results in each case will be compared with those in the others; they will also be contrasted to data drawn from research conducted in American cities. It is within this framework that a study is now in progress on the cultural levels of motion-picture attendance, integrated into the totality of leisure-time activities.

France initiated this type of research and from 1955 to 1957 has studied the development of leisure among the urban and industrial inhabitants of Annecy. It would take too long to analyze the scientific reasons for choosing this group of forty thousand people residing between Geneva and Lyon. Let it suffice to say that they were selected because of the dynamic quality of their industrial, social, and cultural life.

1. The international group in the social sciences studying leisure is sponsored and aided by UNESCO's Department of the Social Sciences as well as by UNESCO's International Institutes of Education and Youth. The group comprises sociologists from Germany, Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Holland, France, Great Britain, Poland, Switzerland, and Yugoslavia.

In order to examine the true levels of cinematic culture, we will give the answers to two questions put to a selected number of heads of families in this sample city. "Why do you go to the motion pictures?" "What do you expect of a good film?" We know that such queries only get at the conscious motivations, that moral norms color the answers, and that all the replies can and must be interpreted in the light of theories of withdrawal and frustration. Yet they represent a necessary beginning. The results we cite are partial ones. When the mechanographic tabulations of the five hundred records that served as the basis of our investigation have been further developed, we will publish far more searching statistical summaries and qualitative analyses. In particular, we lack for the time being the material we need to differentiate social classes from social categories. Nonetheless, since no other French source is available for a discussion of the problem of real-life cinema as we understand it, we thought that this initial glimpse, despite its limitations, would be useful.

Our examples are given not as conclusive evidence but rather as illustrations. Such illustrations are always typical of an ensemble of reactions, of one kind of audience. For the time being we have eliminated exceptional cases, not because they are devoid of interest, but because the sociologist, unlike the journalist, cannot fail to distinguish between the particular and the general. Finally, whenever our study enables us to do so, we have classified phenomena on the basis of their scope. Figures explain nothing, but without them it is impossible to differentiate among widespread, limited, normal, and exceptional phenomena. If we didn't have figures, all Frenchwomen might be redheads.

A. In our sample city, attendance at motion-picture theaters corresponds roughly to the French average; about 60 per cent of the population go to the cinema regularly, and of these a third do so once a month or more. A large proportion of the spectators seem to go not because they love the cinema but rather to break the daily routine. Their motivations are primarily negative. They are seeking *escape*. Motion pictures are but a release, a means of getting away from the "family setup," "they are a chance to go out . . . a way of breaking the monotony, the usual grind," of forgetting "the dullness," of "refreshing one's mind." The cinema-goer does not feel that he is the slave of a timetable. An engineer prefers motion pictures to the theater "not because I like them better but because I can choose my own time." A

105

worker prefers the cinema to the theater because "you can go in even if the film has already begun." About 13 per cent of the answers contain this kind of reasoning.

This kind of escapism does not seem to be lived like a dream that is alien to daily life. On the contrary, it competes constantly with obligations as well as with various forms of daily leisure activity. Family duties are most often mentioned: "I very rarely go to the cinema. We can't go out because of the children and I don't like to go alone," says one workingman. Others, on the contrary, go to the cinema not because they want to see a particular film but merely to accompany their wives. "I go to the cinema when my wife wishes to go; otherwise it doesn't interest me much." We must not forget that 52 per cent of the people who see motion pictures are married couples, as against 35 per cent who are "friends." Family motivations usually coincide closely with purely cinematic ones and either reinforce, weaken, or counteract them. "Motion pictures? I am thinking of my new apartment and of the furniture I will need," says one among the 40 per cent of the Americans who do not go to the cinema. Motion pictures are even looked upon as an inadmissible antithesis to family obligations: "I haven't gone to the cinema since the death of my wife," a thirty-six-year-old worker confides. Research might usefully investigate the relationship between the influence of the cinema and that of the family in determining the real attitudes of spectators of varying ages and backgrounds.

When attendance at a motion-picture theater is possible, it is not regarded as a pastime in any way different from other leisure activities. It is merely one kind among many others, substituted or substituting and, depending upon the circumstances, competing with other pastimes in its function as a means of escape. Some people do, to be sure, exclude the cinema from their preferences: "I don't go to motion-picture theaters; I just go bowling where no one bothers me," a twenty-nine-year-old worker says. "Ever since he has taken up fishing he doesn't go to the movies any more," the wife of a thirty-year-old employee explains. "I perfer going in for sports instead of being a spectator at the cinema," an active twenty-eight-year-old small businessman declares. On the other hand, the cinema is preferred to other kinds of diversion, such as the legitimate theater, for example; comparisons with the latter abound in every social milieu: "Movies are less difficult to make out," or "I

prefer the cinema, the story is more realistic." At the theater "you have to guess, pay more attention"; or, finally, "I prefer the cinema; you can't say it is livelier but it does move quicker," a forty-year-old-worker says, and a forty-eight-year-old female baker says the same thing in approximately identical terms.

B. But in going to the cinema our citizens are not merely seeking escape; they are also seeking *enjoyment*. This pleasurable anticipation is as multisided and diverse as are the functions of leisure activities themselves. Everyone does not sit in a motionpicture theater as if it were "a cathedral." For many, the cinema is merely a pastime whose significance is probably quite similar to that of the escapist diversions we mentioned in the preceding paragraph. "I go to the cinema," says a thirty-year-old technician, "to pass the time, when I have nothing better to do on a Sunday." This elementary form of relaxation affords the kind of satisfaction that requires no effort to understand or think. "It's simply a diversion for me; I don't like pictures that are too complicated," one twenty-seven-year-old worker declares. Another says: "I don't remember anything about a picture I liked; I only go for diversion." This kind of satisfaction might at times put a spectator to sleep if the film has no action. For example, this observation was made by a thirty-six-year-old worker: "I liked *War and Peace;* I like a film where there is some action. If the film has no action, I fall asleep." This sort of reasoning appears in about 24 per cent of the answers.

A large number of answers (40 per cent) indicate a quest for some positive entertainment. For these respondents the cinema has a more precise and a richer meaning. They look forward to an emotional experience. It is true that the cinema affords everyone an opportunity to project or identify. Each spectator, whether or not he is imaginative, can "visualize dreams." With the help of the cinema, everyone can be in his imagination the person he believes himself to be, the man he does not dare to be or wants to be. To put it as Morin, Hoffman, or Artaud do, the cinema enables each of us to satisfy the "other self" that is part of our semi-imaginary reality.[2] In our investigation we have encountered various reactions to themes of love, eroticism, luxury, fighting, adventure, or comedy. But what is striking is that the largest number of those interviewed—20 per cent—prefer *gay* films. *Les Vacances*

2. E. Morin, *Le Cinéma ou l'homme imaginaire* (Paris: Édition de Minuit, 1958).

*de M. Hulot* is often cited; the movie star most frequently mentioned is neither Brigitte Bardot nor Jean Gabin but Fernandel. "I don't go to sad movies, life is sad enough"; or, as one artisan put it: "I want to laugh when I go to the cinema because there aren't many occasions to laugh." "I prefer funny, very funny films," said one tradesman. Intellectuals reserve their praise for Charlie Chaplin. What Lefebvre calls the reverse image of daily life seems to be appreciated the most by this public.

C. To sum up: about 24 per cent of the answers indicate that the cinema is primarily a way of getting *information and instruction*—"to be informed," "to learn," "to think about problems." "I like something that has been experienced, that is true." A twenty-five-year-old worker states: "I go to the cinema mainly to see the newsreel"; "I only remember the documentaries and the newsreels; fiction doesn't interest me," asserts a fifty-year-old employee. "I like documentaries like *Monde du Silence,*" a young workingman says. So far as these people are concerned, through the agency of motion pictures reality surpasses fiction.

It is apparent that the reasons for going to the cinema are complex. In order to complete, probe, and check our analysis, we have approached the problem from an entirely different point of view and have looked for ideal models that might guide the spectator in his appreciation of a good film, a good novel, or a good song. Although our questions referred to works of fiction in general, the answers for the most part had to do with the cinema. These are the answers that we will cite. About 12 per cent of the respondents stress primarily the form or the art of cinema. For them the film must be *beautiful,* and it must tell "a beautiful story." It must also be well acted. Vulgarity, in particular, is the greatest hindrance to enjoyment: A thirty-eight-year-old employee says, "The hardest thing to find is an amusing film that makes you laugh but is not vulgar." He very much enjoyed *The Wages of Fear.* Artificiality is as displeasing as vulgarity: "I don't like overly conventional or artificial situations or sentiments" (a thirty-nine-year-old worker). Finally, this particular audience subordinates the star to the performance of the actor or actress: "I can only remember *Gervaise* played so perfectly by Maria Schell."

Second, 13 per cent of the answers indicate a demand for a *true* picture of life. This audience stresses reality, objectivity, the realism of

work. To buttress such conclusions we can adduce the following typical examples: Newsreels and documentaries: "These are all that I can remember about movies; I don't care for fiction. I like the study of reality" (a fifty-year-old employee). Biographical films: "I like a story that has been lived, that is true," says a forty-five-year-old worker who liked *Moulin Rouge* because it tells the life story of Toulouse de Lautrec. Social films: a sixty-year-old tradesman likes a story that is real or a news story like *Voile bleu*. Sport films: a twenty-nine-year-old worker says: "I don't like movies very much except documentaries about sports." And, finally, travelogues: "What we are looking for is a film that teaches us something, particularly about trips to foreign countries where a film can show us the complexity of life at different social levels and demonstrate that everywhere there are honest and decent folk," observes one worker.

The majority (65 per cent) of the answers, however, emphasize not the quality, form, or reality of a picture but the story interest (theme or subject matter). On this point the results of our investigation into the properties of an ideal story are approximately the same as in the preceding sampling. Comedies (16 per cent) are about as popular as are films concerned with fighting, action, and adventure (15 per cent combined). Only 10 per cent of the heads of families we queried prefer love stories or sentimental ones. On the other hand, we believe it important to stress that about one-fourth of the answers (24 per cent) reveal a desire to see films that give an *idealized* picture of life. If the story is realistic, the wish that it won't be "too grim" is expressed (by more than 20 per cent); if it is a true story, a moral is expected. The story should have social, human significance. The majority of those interviewed betray a need to identify with a strong and magnanimous hero. Many things can be said about the motion picture *Limelight*, but one employee merely states that he liked it and that he was struck "by the magnificent courage" portrayed in the film. Another twenty-nine-year-old worker liked *La Bataille du Rail* mainly "because you saw people who made sacrifices." Noble gestures, exploits, high deeds are what make the greatest impression. "I remember a scene in a picture called *Les Héroes sont fatigués* in which two aviators confront each other." The scenes most frequently mentioned are those depicting bravery in *Les Misérables* or *Notre Dame de Paris*. But this yearning for imaginary grandeur takes different forms. "I was thrilled by Napoleon

109

because he was ambitious," says a twenty-six-year-old employee. Pierre
Fresnay is admired in the parts he plays: "There's a man who holds his
own." Dr. Albert Schweitzer is also admired in the portrayal of his life
"for the work he has done in black Africa." Examples could be multi-
plied. They all converge on the exaltation of "the inner hero" latent in
a large number of spectators.

What tentative conclusions can we draw from this inquiry into
cinematic motivations and ideals? The subjective effect of the motion
pictures must be interpreted with extreme caution as regards cinematic
theories. The complexity of attitudes toward the cinema is apparent. It
is not enough to say that the cinema is part of the daily life of our
times. Attendance at motion-picture theaters must be studied in the
light of the problems of leisure and duty. The influence of the cinema
cannot be studied seriously without taking this into account—the im-
pact of leisure as a whole as well as the impact of family and social
obligations. To be sure, E. Morin is right in emphasizing the difference
between reality and the image of reality.[3] The cinema always consti-
tutes the charm of an image. But an image of what? Meliès and Lu-
mière's images perhaps possess identical explicit features, but there is
a fundamental disaparity in content. Morin rightly stresses the impor-
tance of the imaginary man and of his other self, but there is a basic
difference between identifying with Scarface as over against Pasteur,
or Don Juan, or Dr. Schweitzer, even when the same individual iden-
tifies with diverse and contrasting heroes in turn. Finally, there are fun-
damental differences between those who attribute a major importance
to the form, the art, and those who are indifferent to vulgarity or arti-
fice. It is our aim not to plead for an ethics or an aesthetics but rather
to stress the diversity and ambiguity of attitudes toward the cinema;
and we would also insist on the necessity, from the point of view of the
cultural dynamics of society, of differentiating between passive and
active attitudes on the part of the spectator.

But one must be careful. First of all, a passive and an active attitude
are not in absolute contradiction. The difference is largely a matter of
which is uppermost, and this varies in accordance with the situations
and the individuals concerned. Furthermore, the criteria of apprecia-
tion must be very general. Active attitudes seem to represent those

3. *Ibid.*

physical, affective, and intellectual tendencies most likely to further the development of the personality in cultural and social life. The opening up of one's personality is not limited to the deliberate act of building up the self. It must be balanced by relaxation and diversion. But, for a man to develop his maximum potential, diversions must not be degrading or destructive. In a democracy everyone has the right to play a major part in assimilating and helping to create the cultural works of a civilization and to do so with a minimum of conformity and a maximum of originality.

Everyone is entitled to participate as much as possible in social life and to enjoy a maximum of sociability, not merely being subject to interpersonal relationships among individuals and groups. Rather, he has a right to understand them, to be able to accept or reject them, to submit to them or alter them. He will not be content to be a conforming member of his family or of the social category to which he belongs, but will try to assume maximum responsibility in keeping with both the social requirements of society and those of his own personality.

These active attitudes can be defined as a dynamic ensemble of physical and mental dispositions resulting from the interaction of social and individual factors which tend to further an optimum development of the personality in its total participation in cultural and social life.

How can we characterize active attitudes in regard to the cinema? To begin with, an active attitude is selective. The spectator does not go to see motion pictures because he has nothing to do. And he doesn't go just because the theater is around the corner or because it is Saturday night. He chooses one picture and rejects another. When his choice is made, what is his attitude? First, he is sensitive to the images, action, words, sounds—the ensemble of the film. He tries to rid himself of ready-made images, ideas, of moral and social prejudices which might deaden or suppress a direct reaction to the production he is witnessing. Finally, the active spectator is understanding. The picture has its own special language, vocabulary, grammar, syntax; our spectator attempts to decipher all these during or after the show. Not only does he appreciate beautiful language, but mediocre dialogue hinders his appreciation of the story, the scene, the emotion, or the idea. His understanding grows in depth according to the form of a work. But comprehension of the film is not the final phase of an active attitude. An active spectator stands away from the work itself and evaluates it. He compares it

III

with others. He contrasts it with the reality it expresses. Finally, he seeks an explanation. He not only assesses the strength or weaknesses of a work but tries to understand the reasons for them. In this way a motion picture can furnish an opportunity to improve one's taste, to stimulate comprehension, a critical attitude, one's awareness of the cultural and social impact of such a work. By recreating the processes evoked by the cinema, one can also refine one's appreciation.

In order to stimulate an active attitude on the part of the public, it is essential that good pictures and good criticism be available to everyone. But this is not enough. The pressure of the local population is very strong. Telecommunications do not suffice to alter habits. The influence of leaders and groups with original ideas is both necessary and efficacious. As early as 1930 Warner stressed the importance of organizations in the democratic life of an American city with a population of about fifteen thousand—he called it Yankee City.[4] He counted more than four hundred groups of all kinds, corresponding to all the sectors of social and cultural life. Subsequently, Lewin's studies established the fact that the norms of small groups were more effective than was the influence of telecommunications or of interpersonal relationships in changing the cultural level of an environment.[5] This great psycho-sociologist of group dynamics emphasized the importance of the creation and development of organizations as agents of "socio-cultural ferment." Finally, Lazarsfeld very recently published studies demonstrating that the influence of local leaders had been underestimated in the initial American researches on mass media.[6] All these general comments lead us to stress the important role that a local organization concerned with leisure can exert in gradually raising the cultural level of the general public. This is likewise true of many motion-picture clubs that often stimulate innovations on the part of those who make a living operating cinema theaters and trying to attract large audiences. In France most cities of more than fifteen thousand inhabitants have a *ciné-club*. Of the two hundred and fifty cities in this category about two hundred have active *ciné-clubs*. Our estimate shows that there are

4. W. Lloyd Warner, *"Yankee City"* series (4 vols.; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1941–47).

5. K. Lewin, *Resolving Social Conflicts* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1948) (French trans.: *Psychologie dynamique*, trans. Fauchex [Paris: P.U.F. 1959]).

6. E. Katz and P. Lazarsfeld, *Personal Influence* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1955).

more than seven thousand organizations concerned with cultural or educational motion pictures that select and discuss films. There are more than ten thousand noncommercial projection halls. If the leaders are well trained and if the active spectators express their reactions both within the organizations and outside them, these groups can become pioneering centers and as a consequence will tend to stimulate active attitudes.

The process is complicated. It demands a new type of research. A dynamic and experimental sociology requiring fresh leadership must be substituted for static and analytic sociology. Within the complex mass of reactions produced by the sociocultural situation, how will it be possible to augment the role of active attitudes in every society, every class, and every individual? How can we measure the variations, the lags and imbalances of active attitudes at the various cultural levels that we find within the average outlook of each different group? Finally, how can we study experimentally the changes, incidental or deliberately provoked by the action of films, leaders, groups, that are calculated to promote in the public active, pioneering attitudes at the expense of others? These are the most important questions.