

## THE FILM AS PROPAGANDA

THERE could hardly be a more controversial topic than that upon which I have so rashly consented to embark in this article. The film is an artistic medium, and the discussion of art raises problems upon which all men, creators, critics and public, hold strong and conflicting views. Propaganda, too, is an inflammable subject. Not all those who are officially concerned in it would agree upon the ethics—or even upon the definition—of their calling. It is proper to state at the outset that the following reflections are wholly my own, and in no way represent any views that may be held, officially or otherwise, by my colleagues at the British Council.

Indeed, the British Council, whose immediate purpose is defined by a Royal Charter as being "the promotion of a wider knowledge of the United Kingdom and the English language abroad", tends to avoid the use of the word "propaganda"—and that for the very practical reason that the term is now used in an almost wholly discreditable sense. To-day, the bemused or cynical citizen of a crazy world recognizes propaganda only in one sense; the deliberate propagation of falsehood for political ends. "That," he says, as he turns his news-sheet over or his wireless off, "is just propaganda". And he means, quite simply: "Someone is lying, and they hope to take me in." We must recognize, at the outset of our enquiry, that "propaganda" raises the issue of truth, and that "the film as propaganda" will involve us in a conception of the film as a truth-telling medium, or the reverse.

This is not at all an easy matter. There are many ways in which films can deviate from objective truth, and most of them are subtle. We need not spend long in discussing the crude fake shot, which, in modern days of technical proficiency, is used almost exclusively as a legitimate artistic device rather than as an illegitimate aid to conscious deception. The "truth" or "falsehood" of a film resides, for our purpose, almost wholly in the selection and arrangement of material, in the wording of the commentary, and in the conscious purpose guiding the direction. It is easy to see how these factors may influence, for instance, the newsreel. By judicious omissions and emphasis, and by a carefully phrased commentary, a series of shots from the battle-fronts (each true in itself) may easily give the impression, to a national audience, that a country is winning the war, when it is in fact losing it. Such a film, by such methods, may be made to serve any possible ideology. It may present, according to taste, the wickedness of Jews, the idle luxury of the rich, the merits of proletarians, the beneficence of dictatorship, or the liberality of police-States.

The two types of film most closely concerned in this enquiry—

though all films produce *some* impression on an audience, and therefore propagate *some* idea or other—are the newsreel and the documentary. During the war there has sprung up a most interesting periodical called "Documentary Newsletter", from which I shall, with permission, quote extensively. The D.N.L. publishes articles which are for the most part unsigned, and represent individual views not necessarily supported by the editor. It is concerned just as much with the moral and social aspects of documentary film as with questions of technique and many of the suggestions which it throws out are most stimulating.

On the point which we are now considering, that of the use of the film as an ideological vehicle, and its consequent relation to truth, a writer in D.N.L. justly reminds us that "whenever we are told that 'propaganda' is something abhorrent to decent people and that we can do without it, let us remember that the word was originally used and must still be considered in relation to a faith—"*De Propaganda Fide*" (July, 1942). That is true, and Catholic readers will bow gracefully to the acknowledgment—but they will be tempted immediately to enquire "what faith?" It must be quite obvious that if films are to be produced in order to propagate a faith, the truth or falsehood, the doctrinal and ethical content of that faith must be assessed before judgment can be passed on the productions for which it is responsible. Many of the writers in D.N.L., writing under the stress of ideological war and viewing documentary largely as propaganda material, take the view that, since "democracy" is fighting "fascism", the "faith" behind our officially or semi-officially produced documentaries must proclaim the "democratic faith".

So far so good. But what is the democratic faith? It would be hazardous to attempt to lay down a definition, especially since it is commonly admitted that "democracy" is susceptible of widely different definitions, and that the tendency is for each party or school of thought to claim for itself a monopoly of orthodoxy in this elusive faith. Some of the writers in D.N.L. are not by any means immune from so tempting a fallacy. The truth, in my view, might be stated somewhat as follows: totalitarian states admit the existence, within their boundaries, of a single political, social, and economic faith to which all are bound to adhere under penalties; democratic States admit the existence of many, widely conflicting views on politics and economics, allowing those opinions to prevail which are from time to time most widely held, while minorities in opposition have every liberty to increase their adherents by persuasion.

The consequence, if this distinction is accepted, is most clear,

and most important. It emerges time and time again in the files of D.N.L., for these prophets of documentary show, for the most part, a really objective desire to reach the facts in their search for a "documentary metaphysic". That consequence is that "democracy" must be a faith built upon resultant forces, not upon a single clearly-planned set of ideas, and therefore it will be impossible for a "democratic" propaganda to achieve the ideological force and clarity characteristic of the totalitarian police-State (Left or Right).

On my thesis, it is not at all surprising that so many writers in D.N.L. criticize official British propaganda methods for lack of policy direction. The somewhat naive assumption upon which some of them base their demands for a clearer policy, i.e. that their own pet ideas about social evolution are the only ones upon which such a policy could possibly be founded, serves still further to illustrate the point. "You will have a clear and forceful policy", they say, "if you will adopt our ideas and enforce them". True; but their ideas represent but a single stream of tendency, and in Britain, as in every true democracy, there are many such streams, some converging, some in conflict.

It is interesting to note that in the totalitarian countries, although direction and policy is strong and unified, technical efficiency is often low. We read in D.N.L.: "What gives the German propaganda films, and even more the Russian, the success they have achieved, in spite of their often shocking technical qualities, is the fact that they are a part of, and an important part of, a real and vital national policy" (Dec., 1941). And again: "It may have been inherent in the Russian character that any form of the public service must be inefficient; yet there is little doubt that the bureaucratic machine built up by Stalin has hampered the development of creative work" (May, 1941). This is a theme which has lately been most strikingly developed by Mr. John Lehmann in an article entitled "State Art and Scepticism" (*Penguin New Writing*, No. 24).

That, however, is a side-issue. I should ill represent the contributors to the interesting and useful publication upon which so much of this article is based if I did not stress the importance which they all so emphatically attach to this question of truth. The documentary is defined, in an early issue, as a "dramatisation of fact". As early as March, 1940, when the days of 'phoney' war were drawing to their unhappy close, D.N.L. commented: "In a war between countries professing rival ideologies which compete for world support, the temptation is away from truth in advertising". It is a great matter that should be regarded, and stated, as a temptation. The *Times*, too, about the same time, printed the

view that "it is the duty of a documentary camera to give a portrait of its subject that does not slur over its less pleasant features". This is wise criticism, and upon the whole we may claim that the British documentary film, produced for propaganda purposes, whether at home or abroad, has kept up a good, objective standard.

Nor has that standard been a low one technically. Certain famous films issued by the Ministry of Information have risen to the height of their inspiring subjects. Such, for instance, are "Target for To-night", "Desert Victory", and "The Lion Has Wings". Certain other films, issued by the British Council, represent fine achievements in somewhat different fields. For example, "Surgery in Chest Disease", a genuine and complete record of a major operation (pneumonectomy), is a technical triumph in a most important category of instruction. Council films are mainly of a documentary rather than of a directly educational nature, and in a varied catalogue, including such titles as "Royal Road", a film about H.M. the King, "Little Ships", the story of British boat-building, and "Steel", the story of a great British industry, the Council can show a wide range of subjects, all treated with an objectivity which earns them the true documentary title as "dramatisations of fact". Thus the various official services of information in Britain, which have either been set up or have grown to maturity during the war years, have a reasonably good record to show.

The film as a vehicle of information is as susceptible as any other medium to the enthusiasm and bias of a director who aims at producing a certain effect on his audience. The compilation of a documentary film is not unlike the writing of history. Each process entails the selection and presentation of facts. It is of course quite impossible to rule out bias in work of this kind; a man's mind is all the time receiving impressions and forming judgments. But the same criterion which we apply to the historian can be applied to the documentary producer: be his "faith" what it may, it must not lead him into deliberate falsification or suppression. No one demands of him the presentation of a scientifically balanced thesis, arranging all the data; he must show a reasonable fairness in selection. Upon the whole, reasonable fairness is a quality which the British can justifiably claim both to possess and to exercise. They can therefore, if they will be true to this quality, be trusted rightly to handle this powerful medium of information about which the late Pope wrote: "There does not exist to-day a means of influencing the masses more potent than the cinema". (*Vigilanti Cura*, 1936).

T. F. LINDSAY.

*Assistant Director of Production, British Council.*