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August 22nd,

1 9 1 7.

Professor David Allen Robertson,
University of Chicago.
My dear Mr. Robertson:

I have intended to talk with you in reference to some suggestions made to me by Mr. Vachel Lindsay, who is deeply interested as you know in the art of the moving pictures. He has written a book on that subject which was supplemented by a later volume from Professor Hugo Munsterburg of Harvard. You know, of course, that a series of courses on the moving picture, as a form of artistic eductaion and as a possible aid to general education, has been included in the curriculum at Columbia University and an instructor chosen for this work. Mr. Lindsay is deeply interested in calling this matter to our attention here at Chicago, with the thought that the same plan may be practicable here. Mr. Lindsay is an old friend of mine, and I feel interested in the matter largely on personal grounds. I suggested to Professor MacClintock that it would be a courteous and perhaps a profitable thing if some of us might have a talk with Mr. Lindsay sometime when he is in Chicago, regarding such a plan. He suggested that Professor Lovett might also be interested, and I am writing this note to ask you what you think of the matter. I am inclosing a copy of an article which Mr. Lindsay is sending to the New Republic, in the columns of which several of his articles have appeared from time to time. I should be glad to know your feeling regarding this matter and whether you would be willing to join Mr. MacClintock and myself at some convenient time in a conference with Mr. Lindsay, probably here at the club, and whether you think Mr. Lovett would be interested in the same thing.

Most sincerely yours,

Herbert L. Willett

Advance copy of editorial for the New Republic, submitted confidentially.

Vachel Lindsay,
Springfield Illinois

Motion Pictures

Let Us Substitute Boards of Education for Boards of Censorship

Free speech, a free press and uncensored films have been made synonymous in many minds by the agitation of the photoplay companies. Arguments from the constitution have been thrown on every screen. The photoplay population, which is the same as the census, has read the arguments. There is a considerable minority converted to the fighting of censorship, and against the suupressing of anything, however tactless, this side of treason. "But," says the unconverted good citizen, "without censorship, who will mend the idiotic photoplay we are too tired to revise by our own exertions in our slack evening hours?" Within the year he has seen attempted rape the climax of production after production. One would gather no surly male was ever alone with a lady without peril to her. Here is a list of titles: Parantage, a Thought Film from Real Life; The Easiest Way; The Tiger Woman; Is Marriage Sacred? Chubby Inherits a Harem; The Red Woman; The Mortal Sin; The Eternal Sin; The Web of Desire; The Social Leper; The Monster of Fate; Enlighten Thy Daughter; The Vampire Series of Photoplays, etc. The public school children see such productions with little interference. All these themes are worthy. But we know how tactfully they are developed. Instructions on these subjects is likely to be left by fastidious educators to the priest, the family physician, the carefully chosen book, [illegible]. While the bark of these titles is worse than their bite, for grown ups, for children the dead lines are crossed in an inebriate hectic or crocodile style, children having no sense of humor right here. For them it is like the searing experience recorded in Scudder Middleton's poem "The Wax Museum For Men."

The photoplay people do their own housecleaning, partly by their National Board of Review, partly in the shop. For this effort

Note what is underlined - page 4 -

they take great credit to themselves in convention banquets and in legislative committees where they try to stop new censorships . The Moving Picture World, the thunderer among trade journals, is in general an admirable weekly . Yet the foregoing list of films is taken from the full page advertisments of two recent numbers . It is plain that the advertising department is not a saints rest. Yet this week there is not a single title with a leer, and there is undoubtedly a trade standard of decency, all the time . The editorial column says repeatedly: "If you film manufacturers do not clean up, how do you expect us to fight censorship effectively for you ? " The paper correctly denounces the "Great Moral Lesson " [redacted] film as almost sure to be five reels of hypocritical pandering . But it has not yet denounced the so called educational film, which is the crux of the whole matter . Behold the Stevenson that is not Stevenson, the Browning that is not Browning, the Dickens that is not Dickens, the Hawthorne that is not Hawthorne. Few classics or legends of old have been put on in the films without being first kicked in the stomach . The trade idea of an educational film is a sapless, literal travel-picture, or a classic in acute agony, or dead . These are mixed with the "Great Morel Lesson " films and sold to unsuspecting churches and schools . These churches and schools deceive themselves into thinking they are getting the best motion pictures available .

The producers are not cynical inn intent . They aspire to be innocuous , like the chewing gum barons . This brings us to art amazing self censorship of the photoplay studios . They call it rewriting the accepted script, or expanding the accepted synopsis . They do not know it is the worst censorship of all . It is based on the relentless determination to eliminate thought, any thought that might possibly enter the mind of a scholar and a gentleman, a lady or a sibyl or a sage, [redacted] . ~~Every~~ The ten cent

hotel has its well-read philosophers, but the regularly salaried film editors do not believe it . In order that they may send their strips of celluloid to every babe in arms, all the way to the streets of Chinese cities they seek for impossible common denominators . In the hope of a world enveloping commercial range, they leave out every question under the sun . They leave out the teachings of Confucius, Buddha, Socrates, St . Paul, St. Augustine, Darwin, Emerson, Marx, and of all the teachers between, and of all who differed from them . Any tiniest threads of thought these men set floating in the world, are carefully cut . Millions of feet of film are limited to slapstick, fights, pageants, domesticity and sex . This system is even more barren of late because only the synopsis of a thousand words or so are accepted from outside the shop , and the shop is supposed to have the infallible method of expanding to five reels . It is as though our publishers accepted only the tables of contents and wrote the books themselves . The slapstick must never be varied by gentle humor, the fights must never be about anything that men have ever fought about but visible property or a shrieking woman in plain sight, never about anything with edge in politics, race, religion, or sociology . The pageants must not be tied up to any ritualistic or symbolic conception of religion or art . The domesticity and sex must not turn on anything outside the imagination of a sentimental or morbid sixth grade child .

But what is vice ? Vice is the short circut . Vice is the avoiding of all the fine paths that lead the long way round from primeval romance to pla ces difficult and good for the soul, hard as a row of books on the common law, cold as the north pole, rugged as geology, stern as the day of judgement, and then back again to Eden, or retribution or to the irony of the gods, when they laugh with us and at us, like true companions .

destroys every highway

The scenario editor ~~cuts every thread of silk~~ that might lead from mere desire to the strangeness of Hamlet's tragedy, the clash and wonder of Luther's reformation, the heights of Dante's Paradise or the glories of Milton's Hell . In his zeal to avoid the human mind he inevitably forces desire back upon itself to become self-consuming .

All this fighting for censorship and against censorship is but running around in a circle . It is but piffling and puddling It is never as tactful as clean truth and firey fancy . Several friends have been suggesting a simple home remedy for the situation . It is hereby passed on to all good citizens . In brief, let there be an alliance between our vast responsible educational machine , and our vast irresponsible photoplay machine . Let the local boards of educationm eliminate the local boards of censorship, and become patrons of the most enterprising of the local photoplay theatres . Let the fake educational picture be eliminated . Let the few educational films that are truly such, that are languishing in obscurity and the few films that are classic among photoplay critics be subsidized by our local boards of education, when they will not otherwise be profitable, and brought back to the city at regular intervals . Let the children be examined upon them . Let the theatres in which these appear run the usual number of recreational films, but let the educators be liable for every piece of false science, hysteria or low down smut exhibited in the places under their patronage . Let them approach the task, not as moralists, but as educators .

Just as every depot has its women's side of the waiting room, where ~~men, women and children~~ the whole family can stay in comfort, and its men's side where ~~men~~ males can loaf and chew tobacco and sprawl as thry please, so there could be left a large section of independent theatres which could for the most part work out their own salvation .

But it would be the duty of the school truant officers to keep the children out of these wildcat places . At present our most advanced and expensive pedegogy is apt to be scrambled or lightning seared by ~~the children seeing~~ "The Moral Leper" beheld by the child sometime after four in the afternoon .

As for the State Universities, let them abolish state censorships . Let them look after the state's rights productions , and let them act as clearing houses of the experiences accumulated in the local boards . Let them help in establishing an anthology, an ultra select list of classic films ~~constantly, and~~ jealously trimmed to the minimum . ~~The~~ Some of the universities of a national scope are near to the head offices of the film companies, ~~establish co-operation with these companies~~. Let them advise with each other daily, and let there be a limited financial cooperation . For instance the Universities might subsidize new special lines of films that convey pleasure to the fastidiously educated, or that meet a university need, and put them on a special University, College and club circut . Those that stand this exacting scrutiny, and at the same time prove unusually popular could be recommended to the local boards of education throughout the ~~whole~~ nation .

If there is any thought or imagination or tact in a photoplay it begins in the scenario . The things thatt this article insists have been omitted from the usual run of films , have been omitted from the scenarios, and no amount of photography ~~could~~ can conceal the fact . Obviously it should take a great deal more new scenario-energy than star energy to keep up the photoplay business . The stars with their main supports and directors become well known and do not change rapidly . And the scenario writers are almost unknown . And under the present system the same scenario ~~writer the same system~~ and the same film cannot be used twice the same year .

There are elementary, intermediate and advanced courses of fifteen lectures each . The Cinema Composers of Columbia University is the name of an allied organization . This group is addressed by various people successful in the photoplay world, who air their occasional uncommercial inspirations . Every student has the free use of the little photoplay museum . This contains magazines and books dealing with motion pictures and photoplays, and a collection of scenarios of photoplays produced, and of synopses of photoplays produced . It contains also a collection of still photographs from photoplays produced, from which the aesthetic and art gallery aspects of the films can be studied. Then there is a classified collection of prints of famous paintings to work out the relation of painting conceptions to such ideas as are expressed in the stills. There is a card index of the photoplay market, kept up to date . Special meetings are held when necessary for special study , such as visiting photoplay studios, or attending private or press exhibitions of films.

Each year Columbia may become a little more the clearing house for photoplay ideas of an advanced character . I hope educational executives concerned with developing a policy along the lines suggested by this article, will avail themselves of the experience of Professor Freeburg, and begin with a beginning that has been begun .

Ibsen has been butchered in the motion pictures. Being a dramatist in excelsis, he is utterly unadapted to the films . But his courage is not out of place anywhere . In Norway the controversy over his work rang out till it reached the ends of the earth . The alleged photoplays transcribing him are received without a ripple . Young scenario writers with the Ibsen capacity for setting the world by the ears on fine and high issues, but doing it in celluloid should have a place in the university film circut . They should use the short story, the essay, the poem, the ritual, rather than

the dramatic form . They should be given as much advertising as Douglas Fairbanks, Mary Pickford or Charles Chaplin, without interfering with the well earned glory of those stars .

The leading film makers may yet become giant publishers with establishments of the dignity of conservative book-publishing houses, with a like attitude toward the world of letters . This will not require an enormous financial outlay from the educational world . All that will be needed will be the adding of the narrow percentage that so often makes the difference between profit and loss, the lack of which has kept the film magnates out of serious experiments in incivilization .