

ADULT—APRIL, 1932

Moving Pictures

Are Movies Fit for Children?

Fred Eastman, Litt.D.
Chicago Theological Seminary

Reprinted by Permission The Parents' Magazine

Department of Education and Promotion
Woman's Section, Board of Missions
Methodist Episcopal Church, South
706 Church Street, Nashville, Tenn.

Are Movies Fit for Children?

BY FRED EASTMAN, LITT.D.

*Professor Religious Literature and
Drama, Chicago Theological Seminary*

THE movies have become a hot issue where they touch children. Three questions are pertinent: What are the facts? Who is responsible? How shall we remedy the matter? To attempt answers to these questions is the purpose of this and a succeeding article.

Certain assumptions can be taken for granted. One is that the movies are here and here to stay. Another is that they are potentially the greatest force for recreation and for education that the world has yet seen. Another is that the movies have made marvelous progress in perfecting the mechanics of photography and projection and sound reproduction. Moreover, they have turned out some very good and great pictures—pictures like "The Covered Wagon," "Disraeli," "Abraham Lincoln," "Seven Days' Leave," "Tom Sawyer," "Skip-py," "Father's Son," and a score or more of others which come to our minds. If the pictures were all of this sort or like the delightful cartoons of "Mickey Mouse" and "The Silly Symphonies" or those rollicking comedies usually associated with the names of Charlie Chaplin and Harold Lloyd and Harry Langdon, there would be no need of any inquiry, for such pictures start no trouble. They provide only the warm glow of a fireplace around which the whole world can find cheer and the fellowship of laughter. Unfortunately pictures of this sort make up a small proportion of the 500 and more feature films produced by Hollywood every year.

With these assumptions in mind, let us take up our first question: What is the present situation with regard to the impact of the movies upon children? Well, it is a *big* situation, for the movies touch about 250 millions of people every week—100 millions in the United States and 150 millions abroad. More people will probably see the next Charlie Chaplin release than have seen "Hamlet" in the 300 years since "Hamlet" was written. The movies reach practically every child of school age in America and, of course, a large proportion of those under school age. Social surveys have disclosed that on the average every child of school age sees a movie about once a week and is exposed to that movie about two hours.

THE most recent study of the movie habits of children is that published last year by Mrs. Alice Miller Mitchell. She studied the habits of 10,052 children. She classified them in three groups: first, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts; second, the average run of children in the public schools; third, children in institutions for delinquents. She found that the scouts had been to the movies least often and the delinquents most often. In fairness, it should be said that this does

not necessarily prove that the movies contributed to their delinquency, but the evidence points somewhat in that direction. The alternative to this conclusion seems to be that their frequent attendance upon the movies was a symptom of mental subnormality.

The testimony of some of the children in Mrs. Mitchell's study is worth noting. She asked them what kind of pictures they liked best. Here are a few of the replies:

A boy of fourteen: "I liked especially the fighting and torturing ones. . . ."

Another boy: "It makes you nuts to see so many movies. . . . Just don't know what you are doing when you see movies so often. They make you want things you haven't got . . . and you take them."

A thirteen-year-old girl: "I liked the part best where the girl wanted another girl's husband and took two dimes and pasted them together with heads on both sides and tossed the dimes. Of course she got heads so she got him."

A sixteen-year-old girl: "Those pictures with hot love-making in them; they make boys and girls sitting together get up and walk out, go off somewhere, you know. Once I walked out with a boy before the picture was even over. We took a ride. But my friend, she all the time had to get up and go out with her boy friend."

A fifteen-year-old delinquent boy: "Movies sorter coax a feller. You know you see them in the movies doing things, looks so easy. They get money easy in the movies, hold-ups, rob, if they make a mistake they get caught. I thought I could get the money, put it in a bank a long time and then use it later. . . ."

The editor of *Harrison's Reports*, trade organ of the independent exhibitors, in a recent issue of that journal speaks of "the numerous demoralizing sex and crook pictures that have flooded the market lately. Such pictures," he says, "were produced in the past, but at no time in the history of the motion picture industry have they been so numerous as they have been in the last two years. The number of sex and crook plays that have been released since January first (1931), number at least thirty-eight out of about seventy pictures released; or, about one-half of the release."

Miss H. Doris Stecker, of Cleveland, Ohio, who has been running a theater for many years, passes this judgment upon the pictures, in an article in *Child Welfare Magazine*: "We are projecting our boys and girls, sometimes mere babies, into the lives of adults, since almost no pictures are being made today in this country intended primarily for children and adolescents. . . . The youngsters have learned to participate, through the screen, in things that grown-ups think interesting; the love interest and sex, the business scramble and the perennial emphasis on luxury and material success; night life and the never-ending succession of show girls and pony ballets; rum-running, crook, and underworld stories; the heroism of the ring; and the fun and glory of fighting."

A discussion upon the subject of children and the movies was

about to take place some months ago in the First Methodist Church of Evanston at a gathering of some 300 or 400 women. Just before the meeting began, the rear door opened and down the aisle came sixty or sixty-five men headed by Dr. George Albert Coe, dean of the religious educators of America. It is not a usual thing for such a group of men to "crash the gates" of a woman's meeting. Dr. Coe gave this explanation: "We are having a conference in another church," he said, "on the subject of religious education. I told them that we might as well shut up shop in religious education so long as the movies are having their present effects upon children and that we had better come over here and help settle this movie business first, then go back and take up the matter of religious education."

What do our children see in the movies? An occasional fine picture, to be sure. But the industry has made many promises of a much broader nature. Here are two sets of data. One set contains these promises by the industry. The other set contains performances of the industry as witnessed by its own advertisements in the daily press.

PROMISES

In 1920 high screen officials addressing the Chicago Motion Picture Commission which was investigating the movies preliminary to reporting a bill for stricter censorship said, "Consider the motion picture as it will be ten years from now, not the motion picture of today. Put the modern picture industry . . . on its word for one year; we will show you how to clean up the business."

In March, 1921, the producers made their famous pledge to eliminate *thirteen* varieties of scenes, including (1) emphasizing sex appeal in suggestive forms; . . . (2) showing bedroom and bathroom scenes and inciting dances; (3) containing prolonged demonstrations of passionate love; (4) dealing primarily with the underworld, vice and crime; (5) bearing salacious titles and subtitles. They further pledged themselves to cease using salacious matter in advertisements.

When Mr. Hays' organization came into existence in 1922 it announced

PERFORMANCES

Here are recent movie advertisements clipped from metropolitan newspapers. They are the industry's own description of the pictures put before the children:

"Sex-Appeal? ! ! ! These three babies have EVERYTHING . . . roguish eyes . . . come-hither smiles . . . shapely legs . . . and curves that would make Zeigfeld green with envy. And DO they give the boys a red hot lesson in Parisian Whoopee-Making? . . . Children always 25c."

"Sweetie becomes the Bernhardt of the screen! Dimpled dynamite . . . professional good time girl. . . . She 'took' suckers, sinners, and saints until one made her *beg* for love. . . ."

"Surprising adventure of a beautiful sales-girl who preferred sin in silks to love without luxury."

"All the fun of X— plus warmer mamas! The Roughnecks of X— are kissing the French cuties but clouting hard in all languages! More loving sweeties! . . . Fifi D'Orsay, the Parisienne Temptress de luxe."

PROMISES

that its principal purpose was to "establish and maintain the highest possible artistic standards of motion picture production, and to develop the educational as well as the entertainment value and the general usefulness of the motion picture."

From the Code of Ethics, adopted by the movie industry, March 31, 1930:

"Sex. The sanctity of the institution of marriage shall be upheld. Adultery . . . shall not be presented attractively."

"In general, passion should be so treated that these scenes do not stimulate the lower and baser elements."

"Seduction or rape should never be more than suggested . . . and never shown by explicit method."

"Methods of crime should not be explicitly presented."

"Brutal killings are not to be presented in detail."

"Use of firearms should be restricted to essentials."

"The use of liquor in American life, when not required by the plot, or for proper characterization, will not be shown."

"The history, institutions, prominent people, and citizenry of other nations shall be presented fairly."

From the movie industry's Advertising Code:

Point 2. "Good taste shall be the guiding rule of motion picture advertising."

Point 3. "Illustration and text in advertising shall faithfully represent the pictures themselves."

Point 11. "Nudity with meretricious purpose and salacious postures shall not be used."

PERFORMANCES

"Spain is the locale of this romance and action, to be more specific, takes place in a dance hall and in the arms of two women. X . . . is cast as the impassioned dancer, who is holding her man with animal magnetism."

"TODAY—The modern woman scorns the fidelity of yesterday—the love that endured for better, for worse—TODAY—married women take all they can—trifle now and then—and give hubbie the air when things go bad—that is the woman of 'TODAY'—a blazing exposé of new moralities—new conventions. . . ."

"The electrifying truth about Gangland's sex-appeal stool pigeons!"

"Let's Go Native. Imagine this merry gang of young moderns cut loose on a South Sea Isle. A glowing hula moon their only chaperone . . . women and whoopee . . . Children all day 20c."

"Broadway jolted by this racy, risqué, daring, sophisticated cyclone. You'll yell to see this bachelor as he becomes a father on his wedding eve."

"SHE BEGGED HIM: Let's keep from marriage as long as we can: I'm afraid of it: afraid of its intimacies . . . its pettiness . . . its quarrels will kill our love! If I, the woman, do not ask for marriage, why should you, the man? Story of a modern girl in love."

"A revealing peek through the keyholes of married ladies' boudoirs!"

"Never before has the screen dared to tell so shocking . . . so startling a story! . . . A woman of the streets married to a brilliant man of wealth during a wild midnight orgy."

NEARLY all of these advertisements concern plays run in theaters owned by the producers themselves, and have appeared since the Code of Ethics adopted March 31, 1930, and the advertising code adopted three months later. The producers, therefore, cannot blame the local exhibitors.

But it may be contended that the pictures are not as bad as their advertisements make them out to be—that the advertising really besmirches the pictures. That would be a strange kind of advertising, but let us grant it. Let us, then, call in other witnesses as to the character of the pictures the producers are putting before our children. In 1924 the Chicago Censorship Board examined 788 pictures. From those it eliminated 1,811 scenes of assault with guns with intent to kill; 175 scenes of assault with knives with intent to kill; 271 scenes of hanging; 173 scenes of horror such as clawing out eyes, biting off ears, etc.; 757 scenes of attacks upon women for immoral purposes—altogether about 4,000 scenes in one year. Last year (1930) the same Board of Censors inspecting almost the same number of pictures had to reject 150 reels altogether; made 2,959 cuts in other reels and marked 45 entire pictures "for adults only." Among the cuts were 1,380 scenes portraying crime, 850 of sex immorality, and 350 of vulgarity or indecency. Here is a quotation from a letter dated March 9, 1931, from the head of the Chicago Censorship Board, "Pictures the last year have been more objectionable from the standpoint of immorality and criminality than ever before." Similar figures might be cited from other boards of censors. When one considers what the censors in Chicago and New York *left in*, they can hardly be accused of Puritanism. But here is the important part in this testimony of the boards of censors: Only about 20 per cent of the film territory of the United States is under any form of censorship or social control whatever so that about 80 per cent of the children of school age of America had presented before them upon the screen these thousands of scenes which the Chicago and New York censors deleted or marked "for adults only."

Call as a witness Mr. Nelson L. Green, editor of the National Film Estimate Service, an independent organization having a corps of well-qualified volunteer reviewers throughout the country. He examined about 200 films released during the last six months of 1930. He classified only 4 per cent of those as highly recommended for children between the ages of 10 and 14; only 8 per cent as recommended, and only 17 per cent as even fairly good or passable."

The gist of such evidence concerning the character of much of the material presented upon the screen to our children is that it is saturated with crime and sex; it is permeated with false views of life; it glorifies the acquisitive instincts; it is cheaply sentimental; and a large part of it deals with social sewage of the underworld.

NOTE.—See article in *Parents Magazine*, November, 1931, for article under the caption: What Can We Do about the Movies? by Fred Eastman.