

FILM RESPONSIBILITIES

Since the passing of the Quota Bill—a little *distrain* following the sensation of the Talkie Bill—we have heard much of the peculiar responsibilities which the film world has to face. We have been reminded, a little pompously sometimes, of the responsibility of the films towards the Empire, towards industry, towards education, towards many other things having the dullest relation to our daily entertainments; confusing rather than elucidating them. No doubt film directors in all countries are compelled to consider these matters and do their worst, which with great competence they do. But in the more adult film territory now coming into being, they are ceasing to matter, and we may well leave them alone. For it is clear enough that they are being crushed out of existence by the newer men, of harder metal, wider knowledge and greater all-round artistry.

Out of this chaos of responsibilities, the heaviest of which, at present, is the box-office, we may isolate one only which lies at the back of them all and dominates every film of any merit—namely, the responsibility of the film-maker towards himself. Probably every important director, from Griffith to Pabst, has recognised this, but it has only emerged quite

CLOSE UP

recently as a general proposition, and in actual practice it has probably not emerged at all in this country.

If the box-office is the primary responsibility, then what is the use of exclaiming, even through a megaphone: "This picture isn't saying what I mean!" Such a complaint expresses a sense of personal responsibility, and it is this sense which appears in rising curves of significance as the finer type of film advances. It is appearing now. In my own mind—probably because *The End of St. Petersburg* and *Mother* were so impressive—I associate it with the name of Pudovkin, but it is arguable that *Intolerance* or *The Scarlet Letter* were inspired by a similar spirit, were points in the same curve. I do not think any student of films will deny that the Russian film, such as we have seen it, is the first to avow quite openly its individual beliefs, its passionate desire that the director shall be true to himself.

This seems to me (with no money in film shares) the only thing that really matters in film-making. And even if I *had* money in them, and a Rolls-Royce and enough spare cash to entertain all the plumper of Mr. Cochran's *Young Ladies*—even so, I should still contend, from the footboard of my Rolls and at the top of my Royce, that the freedom of the film director must be preserved at all costs, and I would gladly cast Treasury notes in both colours and denominations to all and sundry who were of that opinion.

I went to see *Volga Volga* a short while ago at the Tivoli. Now, *Volga Volga*, notwithstanding occasional shots of good photographic quality, is an example of the mindless film in which the director, having nothing particular to say, is under every obligation to the producers and none to himself. It's

true, this picture comes under the producer-renter-distributor category, with responsibilities outside my present point of view. At the same time, by being so interminably flat, the film sends up the peak of my contention to its height—that of the necessity for the director's complete integrity of spirit in all that he directs. If a man is telling a story, be he Edgar Wallace or John Galsworthy, he owes it to his public to tell it as well as he can. Similarly with films. American programme and "super" pictures shoulder their technical responsibilities with astonishing efficiency. The responsibility of the director is here limited to his skill in the studio, and it is only now—with a few exceptions, such as Victor Saville, Alfred Hitchcock (in his pre-*Champagne* days) Dupont, Graham Cutts (in his pre-*Confetti* period), Manning Haynes and Anthony Asquith—that we can credit ourselves with as vital a technical interest. And this reform, moreover, coincides with the general air of cosmopolitanism, the "ask-the-foreigner" policy which is gradually and firmly and finally establishing itself in British studios.

When we shift from this technical world into the world of ideas—and it is here Pudovkin and his school triumph so completely—we are very differently placed. Our post-war philosophical habit—so cool in its a-moralities and immoralities—suddenly discovers the necessity for an attitude that goes deeper. At least, it has not discovered it yet, but it will have pretty soon if it is to compete with the Continent, if it is to achieve anything at all worth achieving. In short, it must break away from its own tyrannies—that of studio executives, public tastes, film formulas, Empire needs, production "highlights" and so on. That is the delegation of

CLOSE UP

responsibility along lines which cancel each other out, leaving nothing but a messy entertainment for the oafs and yokels of Midgley-upon-Muff.

It is all very well to talk, you may say, but how is this to be done? Take away these highlights and you take away the film too in its own habitation, from its own cash-box. And inevitably. For you will never get freedom for the director until you do. I may have much in common with the village idiot, and, indeed, there is a sort of madness in clamouring for spiritual freedom amid blocks of materialism. But if Pudovkin or Eisenstein commands his freedom and nails down his responsibility by his greater knowledge of the game, and says what he thinks in the way he thinks by a long-laboured-for mastery, why should not we do so?

And, of course, we shall do so, though the time be far distant, and though England is not at all like Russia in her film-making opportunities. That is of no consequence. Mr. Bernard Shaw may say to Mr. Austen Spare "Knock anybody down who calls you an artist", because that is the sort of thing one only says to a man who is an artist already and has the highest sense of his calling. But that is the sort of man we want behind our films—preferably with £100,000 a year . . .

No; I will not be tempted. I have put all my money into talkies!

ERNEST BETTS.