

The Knowledge Bank at The Ohio State University

Ohio State Engineer

Title: The Engineer's Bookshelf

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Issue Date: Mar-1938

Publisher: Ohio State University, College of Engineering

Citation: Ohio State Engineer, vol. 21, no. 4 (March, 1938), 8-10.

URI: <http://hdl.handle.net/1811/35486>

Appears in Collections: [Ohio State Engineer: Volume 21, no. 4 \(March, 1938\)](#)

THE ENGINEER'S BOOKSHELF

By WILSON R. DUMBLE

The Motion Picture

Directly connected with the reading of the average man is the arrival in the world of motion pictures of the use of the classics for screen production. Literature is in the movies. Today the motion picture addict is turning, in many cases for the first time, to reading in their original form stories that he has seen in pictures. Or he may be renewing a forgotten acquaintanceship with Madame DeFarge in the *TALE OF TWO CITIES* or with Jean Valjean in *LES MISERABLES* by rereading the novel as well as seeing the picture. The "movie" industry is here to stay; and due to the efforts of its producers and directors the motion picture has reached a stage of near perfection.

With the advent of talking pictures in 1929 the motion picture industry started on a cycle of success that has brought to every corner of our land the very best in entertainment. Although still lacking some of the qualities that give pleasure in a flesh and blood performance on the legitimate stage, the talking picture in some departments is superior to a stage show.

This superior quality, however, could not have been detected in the earlier pictures. Early audiences cared little for production technique; they were willing to sit spell-bound at the very sight of pictures that actually moved. They witnessed first, in 1893, the Edison Company's production of "The Execution of Mary, Queen of Scots." It was directed by William Heiss, but the identity of the cast remains unknown. Curiously enough, it was regarded as a peep-show, crudely acted and even more crudely photographed.

By 1902 some advance had been made in camera tricks and artistic devices, so that when "A Trip to the Moon" was filmed, progress was noticeable. The next year brought to the screen "The Great Train Robbery," creating a sensation with its innovations. This is one of the first pictures in which the whole feeling was definitely cinematic. Instead of the actors moving horizontally before the camera, as they had done in earlier films, they moved with a new freedom of action towards and away from the camera. Once or twice, it was even noticed, the camera was swung around to follow the action. "Faust" was brought to the screen in 1905, and six years later Sarah Bernhardt played "Queen Elizabeth" to Lou Tellegan's Earl of Essex. For the next fifteen years the growth of motion picture technique was gradual, until, with the arrival of the talking pictures in 1929, great strides in artistry were remarkable.

Few motion picture enthusiasts, however, are able to distinguish between a good and a poor picture; many go regularly to a certain "movie" house on a certain night of every week, regardless of the offering on the screen. It is far better, of course, to pick one's pictures discriminatingly and to choose the better productions.

These better productions, no doubt, are better for the very reason that they have received special consideration on the movie lot; for in order to produce a good talking picture many items must receive careful thought. To begin with, the direction in producing the picture must be of the highest rank. For this reason the director is an all important man. It is he who, so to speak, manages the action of the actors, who knows their capabilities and is able to get as much good work out of them as is humanly possible. He must study the script of the play, consult with the technical director in planning settings and confer with the location man in arranging suitable locations. Lastly, the director must help to draw up the "shooting" schedule.

Many a good picture has been ruined by the misguided efforts of a poor director; conversely poor pictures have been made doubly interesting by the ability and genius of such directors as Frank Capra and Sergei Eisenstein.

In the second place, the director must have a desirable story to work with in order to produce a good picture. When a story is purchased for picture production, a trained scenario writer must prepare from it a scenario, or continuity, which is a version presenting all details, including spoken dialogue, of the picture as it is to appear on the screen. There are two sources from which Hollywood gets its plots for the screen productions. Some of the stories are written for the screen itself and are designed to contain all the elements that make up good "box-office." Charlie Chaplin's last few pictures fall in this class. Mr. Chaplin wrote them himself and they were designed to fit his own native capabilities which make him probably one of the finest pantomimic artists of the screen.

The other sources for stories that Hollywood uses are plays written for the legitimate stage or books—biographies, autobiographies and novels—which have been rewritten and adapted to the screen by the scenario writer. Not a few legitimate plays that have been Broadway successes are purchased by Hollywood producers, readapted to screen use and usually are

very successful, both from artistic and financial viewpoints. Many could be mentioned here but among those that were highly entertaining and well produced were "Front Page," "Grand Hotel," "Street Scene," "Dinner at Eight," "Reunion in Vienna," and "Animal Kingdom." Sidney Kingsley's "Men in White" is another example of a successful Broadway production becoming an equally successful Hollywood vehicle. No sooner was "Men in White" a New York theatrical favorite than the production rights were purchased for the motion picture presentation. Several months later, when it was given the Pulitzer Prize Play Award for 1934, Hollywood immediately pushed the picture to completion.

When the plot from a famous novel is rewritten for the screen, the scenario writer meets and must overcome numerous difficulties. It is obvious that a serious problem is faced in cutting down a long novel with an intricate plot and a score of minor characters, to the length of an average motion picture production. Sometimes this task is done most admirably; other times the scenario writer fails and the picture is spoiled. Splendid work in this field transplanted Charles Dickens' "David Copperfield" from the printed page to the silver screen. Equally good work was evident in doing the same to Victor Hugo's "Les Miserables" and Ernest Hemingway's "A Farewell to Arms." On the other hand, Willa Cather's "A Lost Lady," as good a story as ever written, was completely ruined by screen transplanting.

Quality of acting is another essential for a motion picture if it is to be successful. Actors must be intelligent in order to read their lines with the delicate shadings of emotion that are required in their parts, and often poor stories are made into successful pictures by the fine acting of the leading artists in the parts they take. For example, John Barrymore made an interesting character study in the rôle of the insane husband in "The Bill of Divorcement"; and the work of Katherine Hepburn in the same production won for her the success which she later carried to "Little Women," probably as fine and sensitive a piece of acting as any shown on the screen. The meticulous and intelligent work of Helen Hayes in "A Farewell to Arms" proved an outstanding feature of that production. Edna May Oliver and Marie Dressler possessed the happy faculty of "saving scenes" in many productions where they appear, due entirely to their ability to sense the qualities needed in the particular situations. Miss Dressler, as Charlotta Vance in "Dinner at Eight," showed great skill with her fine sensing and timing of lines. Miss Oliver, too, with her sharp, stinging delivery, can rise to any occasion and literally "steal" a scene. As the Nurse in "Romeo and Juliet" she showed intelligent restraint. All this is acting of the finest order, and without such quality a motion picture can fail unmistakably.

In the production of a good picture, just as important as the director, the story and the acting, is the quality of some of the mechanical devices that are employed to produce the desired effects. Sharp photography, diffused "shots," appropriate and well-constructed sets, accurate sound and music effects are the chief mechanical devices that demand attention of the producers.

Some productions are noted for their photography. The shots in Eisenstein's "Thunder Over Mexico" were the results of a far-seeing eye of artistic quality, and audiences still recall the Alpine background employed in taking the scenes for "The Lost Battalion," a truly remarkable picture. Photography is an art in which the motion pictures have the advantage over the legitimate stage; outdoor backgrounds are as limitless as the world itself. Long distance shots, many moving from point of focus; close-ups taken to show facial expressions of the actors in order to portray character; and fade-ins and fade-outs, used at the right times to express doubt are some of the problems that face the photographer.

In the field of photography, outdoor shots are not the only kind to be considered. Attention must also be given to interior settings. The scene in the operating room for "Men in White" and the banquet hall setting in "The Private Life of Henry the Eighth" are splendid examples of interior sets that undoubtedly were thoughtfully considered before the scenes were taken.

Proper sound and reproduction of appropriate music are mechanical devices, but the making of a good picture depends on their quality. Music is employed at the more significant spots in a picture with tremendous artistic effect. One fine use of music in an outstanding picture was the rhythmic introduction of a crescendo crash in Norma Shearer's "Barretts of Wimpole Street," when, after Robert Browning's call on Elizabeth Barrett, she arises from her sofa-couch and walks to the window for the first time. As Miss Shearer, who played the part of Elizabeth most admirably, reached the ivy-covered window and placed her hands and face against the pane, an effective rush of music accompanied her every gesture.

As necessary as appropriate musical backgrounds, proper sound effects also have been splendidly employed in recent pictures. Effective sound is absolutely essential in Walter Disney's Mickey Mouse and Silly Symphonies pictures. When Donald Duck, for instance, uses his guttural tones to condemn some of his animal associates, despite the lack of words, the audience can tell instinctively what is being said. Some of Mr. Disney's productions are masters in pantomime, gaining effects with sound and music.

In the musical field, Grace Moore was the first to prove to the Hollywood producers that the public likes grand opera in the cinema. Miss Moore's "One

Night of Love" and "Love Me Forever," both splendidly produced, were on a level with Metropolitan Opera House showings. Nelson Eddy's "Naughty Marietta" and Mary Ellis' "Paris in Spring" were of the same quality; and of course such musical comedies as "Roberta" and "The Gay Divorcee" deserve more than honorable mention.

To choose the right motion picture to see is not always an easy task. Advertising is not reliable and cinema-critics are not always dependable. Certain magazines and newspapers, however, run columns of fairly intelligent advice about pictures, and a frequent patron of the motion picture should select a critic whom he thinks dependable and acquire the habit of

reading his reviews and following his suggestions.

In *The New York Times* and *The New York Herald-Tribune* good motion picture criticism can be found. *Time* and *Stage* magazines also are probably as discerning as any of the periodicals publishing criticisms.

The motion picture industry is a growing concern, yet young in years of development; surely greater achievements may be expected for it in the future. In the last twelve months a better group of intelligent pictures has come from Hollywood than in all the years of its previous experience; and with a public more aptly educated to appreciate the best in films there is no limit to the heights of artistry it may attain.