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Book Review

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Past, Present and Future of the Movie



A Review by
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THAT MARVEL—THE MOVIE. By Edward S. Van Zile. With an introduction by Will H. Hays. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons.

A MOST interesting study of the motion picture, embodying a serious argument on the power for good or evil of the cinema, is contained in Edward Van Zile's volume, "That Marvel—the Movie." The author dwells at length on the far-reaching effects of the photoplay throughout the world and lights upon the happy idea that the motion picture is the "Esperanto of the eye." He concludes that Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde are struggling for domination of the screen, and that the issue of the conflict is still in abeyance. He has a great deal of faith in what Will H. Hays will be able to accomplish with the producers—perhaps too great a faith in view of what even a Hays is talking—and refers to the erstwhile Republican National Chairman's figures and his declaration that the motion picture has grown from a naked idea to be the chief amusement of millions.

Possibly the most compelling portions of this book are those in which Mr. Van Zile tackles the early history of the cinema. He brings out that two Frenchmen, two Americans and two Englishmen share the glory for the discovery of the moving picture. He outlines his notion that there could have been no such thing as a motion picture if it had not been for the first still photograph made by Daguerre, and also that it would still have been impossible if it had not been for Eastman's share in the discovery. Thomas A. Edison also receives credit for his part in the invention, as well as Muybridge and Robert Paul, the two Englishmen. In referring to the six men responsible for the amusement for millions Mr. Van Zile writes:

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The early history of the cinematograph presents a study in international rivalry. The United States, England and France wrote names on the scroll of fame upon which the scientists and promoters who rendered motion picture possible make their bid for immortality. Edison and Eastman, Americans; Daguerre and Messrs. Lumière & Sons, Frenchmen; and Muybridge and Paul, Englishmen. Daguerre, a Frenchman, rocked the cradle of photography, Muybridge, an Englishman, taught it to run, and Edison, an American, gave it wings.

Muybridge was an enthusiast on cameras and race horses, and during a visit to California he met Senator Leland Stanford, also a crank on blooded trotters. During the visit the merits of a certain horse were discussed, Stanford differing with Muybridge. To settle the dispute Muybridge conceived an ingenious plan. He placed a row of twenty-four cameras along one side of the race course. Attached to the shutter of each he fastened a long thread, which in turn was carried across the tracks, and then to make certain of getting sharp exposures, he erected a white screen opposite to serve as a reflector. When all was in readiness the race horse was turned loose down the track. Mr. Edison, in explaining this, is quoted as declaring that when the horse passed the rows of cameras the various threads snapped, and a series of photographs, establishing each successive point in the action of the horse, were registered. On developing the plates they revealed for the first time a complete photographic record of the minutest details of a horse in actual motion, and Muybridge had the satisfaction of using them to win his argument. It appears that he might have just put the pictures away, but some one suggested trying the effect on a zoetrope, something like the kinetoscope. The effect was so startling that it created a sensation.

It is interesting that if an attempt had been made to make a real motion picture lasting just one brief minute it would have required, under Muybridge's plan, seven hundred and twenty cameras. All this happened in 1872.

Referring to Frederick A. Talbot's writings, Mr. Van Zile points to the turning point in the career of Robert W. Paul:

About 3 o'clock one morning in the early months of 1895 the quietness of Hatton Garden was disturbed by loud and prolonged shouts. The police rushed hurriedly to the building and found Paul and his colleagues in their workshop, giving vent to wholehearted exuberance of triumph. They had just succeeded in throwing the first animated pictures on a screen. To compensate the police for their fruitless investigation, the film, forty feet in length, producing a picture seven feet square, was run through the special lantern for their edification.

Of special interest is the reference to the fact that Paul, the stepfather of the movie, as Van Zile

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calls him, entered into partnership with Sir Augustus and Lady Harris and made the Olympia Theatre in London the first picture palace in the world, catching the popular fancy with what was called a "theatograph." Eventually Paul controlled eight London theatres showing motion pictures, and he made a contract with the Alhambra for two weeks of pictures in March, 1896, which was stretched to four years.

Both Paul and Sir Augustus believed the fickle public would soon tire of what seemed to be to them merely an ephemeral novelty. In the chapter in which Mr. Van Zile writes that the movie grew up in the slums he refers to the decision of the natives of Stratford-on-Avon not to have their town desecrated by movies. The author goes on to say that it is not for Americans to jeer at the inhabitants of Shakespeare's birthplace, as in 1826 the Lancaster (Ohio) School Board adopted the following resolution:

Such things as railroads are impossibilities and rank infidelity. If God had designed that His intelligent creatures should travel at the frightful speed of fifteen miles per hour by steam, He would clearly have foretold it through His holy prophets.

The author asserts that whatsoever is new under the sun must fight for its place in the sun, seeing that even bathtubs were denounced by our medical men as a menace to the public health, and that for centuries the printing press had to struggle for freedom against restrictive influences that looked upon it as an "agent of the devil."

In another reference to Mr. Hays the author says that what Judge Landis is endeavoring to do for the national game and Augustus Thomas for the stage is, in a general way, what Will H. Hays has been called upon to effect in the field of the motion picture. He does not mention the fact that Mr. Hays did not strengthen his position with the motion-picture producers or the public when he lifted the ban on Arbuckle's pictures.

Mr. Van Zile, always willing to indulge in aliterative phrases, asserts that the cinematograph has risen from mush to masterpieces, and sets forth the lurid titles of some films, some of which were produced last year, such as "Deserted at the Altar," "More to Be Pitied Than Censored," "Thorns and Orange Blossoms," "The Curse of Drink," "How Women Love," and "The Lure of Broadway." He praised the wonders worked by David W. Griffith, whose "Birth of a Nation," he says has been called "a celluloid Peter Pan which will never grow old." Mr. Van Zile declares that this production was also the birth of a new area for the screen. He goes on to say that the carper and skeptic will always be with us, and that Will Hays, capable of organizing victory for the Republican Party, is thought by the pessimist to be attempting an impos-

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sible task in endeavoring to make permanent the loftier scope that Griffith and other praiseworthy producers have given to the screen.

To these Van Zile replies:

But these atrabilious knockers, short-sighted, narrow-minded and unimaginative, have failed to take a bird's-eye view of the varied influences and enterprises now in action with the avowed purpose of perpetuating the impetus given to the better type of photoplay by the permanent success of "The Birth of a Nation."

He goes on to point out that "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse," as presented on the screen, was free from the shortcomings ascribed to Ibáñez's novel. In another chapter Mr. Van Zile deals with the rapacity for stories developed by the screen, asserting that an audience of several millions daily cannot have the cream of the world's imaginative literature without resorting shortly to skimmed milk and eventually coming to the end of lacteal resources. He is of the opinion that what the hokum audiences accepted in the past they will now reject, and admits that there has been a tendency to under-rate the general intelligence. He opines that as a medium for drama the screen is only just beginning to break away from the influences that controlled its first stages.

Mr. Van Zile mentions productions that are milestones in the progress of the industry, and his whole volume is sincere and frank. However, concerning his faith in the future, one must bear in mind that producers, as a body, are not particularly keen about anything new that attacks their purses, and his argument for an improved type of pictures will only carry weight if he can prove that these productions will bring in as much money as the others.

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