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MECHANIZED  
MUSE

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**The Mechanized Muse**

**MARGARET KENNEDY**

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P.E.N. BOOKS  
*General Editor* : HERMON OULD

THE  
MECHANIZED MUSE

*by*  
MARGARET KENNEDY

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WOKING

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*The author of this book is a member of the P.E.N., but the opinions expressed in it are her personal views and are not necessarily those of any other member.*



## THE MECHANIZED MUSE

**O**NCE upon a time, about fifteen years ago, the manufacturers and salesmen of a particular patent collar stud met for their annual luncheon at a famous London hotel. It was a genial gathering, for they had brought their wives with them, and champagne cocktails were served freely. The percentage of old acquaintance was high. Conversation was animated, for Travellers know how to talk. Backs were slapped and good stories were told in corners. Little wives simpered shyly; big wives were graciously patronizing.

These people looked happy and they had sound reasons for being so. They knew what they were doing. They knew what they wanted. The Collar Stud, from which all blessings flowed, brooded over them like a tribal totem. None of them was troubled by any doubts as to the nature and purpose of a collar stud. They made it and they sold it. It provided them with a job and a future, it paid rent, rates, and school bills, it put new three-pieces onto the backs of the little wives and pearls round the necks of the big ones. All collar studs are good and useful objects, and their own was the best on the market.

In the general hubbub the arrival of several queer-looking strangers was at first overlooked. Later on everybody began to wonder who they could be. For they seemed ill at ease and friendless. They drank but did not talk, and stood eyeing their neighbours with a kind of suspicious curiosity. Beside the dapper, eupeptic Collar Studs they looked shabby and bilious.

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And they had a peevish expression which no retailer would have found persuasive—the air of people who dislike what they are doing and are far from sure of what they want.

After an interval they began to drift together into a little group. They seemed to have met before, though they took little visible pleasure in recognizing one another. Finding themselves thus stranded in an alien *kraal*, they were forced into a kind of Stanley-Livingstone cordiality and exchanged a few moody salutations. They marvelled to see themselves, and each other, where they were. No suspicion had as yet crossed their minds that they must have got into the wrong party. On the contrary, the entrance of a famous actress strengthened their conviction that they had got into the right one.

Everybody stared at her, and nobody felt inclined to tell her that she ought not to be there. For the Collar Studs, who had worshipped her for years, were delighted to meet her and to have the privilege of bringing her a cocktail. Besides, she gave nobody a chance to get in a word edgewise. She picked out, at a glance, their Big Chief, and told him that his idea was simply marvellous. She was crazy about it. But did he really think that the films, now that they had begun to talk, would kill the stage?

"I'm afraid," he stammered, "that I can't . . ."

"You can't say *what's* going to happen? Oh, I know. Nobody can. That's why this party is such a wonderful idea, with the *entire* film world turned upside down and everything. Because the sooner we all get together . . . I mean, what *is* a talking film? A sort of photographed play? Because, in that case . . ."

At this point a well-known stage director appeared and took her away, explaining that this was the wrong party.

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She went, with a show of reluctance which delighted the Collar Studs.

"Why do I have to go? This is a lovely party. I'm sure it's nicer than your party. *They* don't belong here either," pointing to the Stanley-Livingstone group, "and you don't make them come."

The director looked them over and recognized one or two faces. He said, without much enthusiasm:

"They don't. I must. They're authors. ..."

He shepherded his morose flock upstairs and downstairs and along corridors and round corners until they reached the right party, which was indeed not nearly so nice. An act of hospitality was being committed, but nobody was quite sure by whom, or for what purpose. Its totem was the Sound Film, which had recently burst upon the world and placarded London with invitations to the public to SEE AND HEAR their favourite stars. Most of the guests were strangers to one another. Members of the upside down film world were there, hoping to be turned right way up by closer contact with the stage, with authors, with anyone who might tell them what to do next. The stage was there in the hope that this new portent might signify translation rather than death. Authors were there because their agents had told them to go.

As a totem, the Sound Film was neither so familiar nor so kindly as the Collar Stud. It might be big with benefits but it was also a menace, and threatened ruin to numberless people. There was money in it; everybody was sure of that, but they were sure of nothing else. Even those who hoped to make it and sell it had no clear idea as to nature and purpose. They could scarcely have come to any agreement as to what it ought to be.

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It is wonderful that so many people should still be able to share the optimism of Mr. Lambkin, in his prize poem:

When Science has discovered something more,  
We shall be happier than we were before.

For Science is always showering down upon us these disconcerting benefits, these miraculous implements, which we neither desire nor deserve. And our attempts to make use of them, though sometimes comic, are often grim.

On this occasion comedy prevailed. Science was offering a wonderful baby, a Midas, an infant Hercules, to anyone who could improvise a cradle large enough to hold it. None of the Arts felt inclined to accept responsibility. The showmen, the purveyors of entertainment, were ready enough to accept paternity and pay for its keep, but they could not cradle it. Nor could they purvey something which did not as yet exist. The tools, only, existed. Nobody knew how it should be cherished, nurtured and fed.

Nothing quite like this has ever happened before in the whole history of Art. It is to be hoped that nothing like it will ever happen again; but Science has grown so fond of presenting us with these unspecified tools, means without an end, that further surprises of this kind are more than likely. Development, in the past, has always followed a reverse order. The inspiration, the idea, the desire to make a pattern, has preceded the technical apparatus. The painter has devised new methods, has experimented with new colours and surfaces, the better to execute designs which are already in his head. Stages have been enlarged and improved for the better performance of a drama already in existence.

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But in this case technical apparatus outran inspiration. Here was a new medium of expression, a way of telling stories, of creating suspense, exciting emotion, arousing both the intellect and the imagination; here was spectacle assisted by sound, music interpreted visually, and drama set free from the limitations of the stage. But nobody felt any impulse to make use of it. Cave men, scratching bison and deer upon the rock, would have found little in a modern studio that they could use. Shepherds, piping on their oaten reeds, would have made sad work of most of the instruments in a Wagnerian orchestra. Peasant mummers, bellowing *St. George* in a farmhouse kitchen, felt no need of a curtain and a revolving stage. Yet—cave man, shepherd and peasant—each had his own rough, primitive idea of what a satisfactory drawing, or tune, or play, should be. As much can scarcely be said of the first fabricators of sound films. They had no notion of what they wanted to make. Nor had the public much notion of what it wanted to see and hear. The artist and his audience were equally at a loss.

The unlimited possibilities of this new medium were in themselves drawbacks which mitigated its value to Art. For all the arts grow up from the soil, as it were, of their own limitations. In every medium there must always be some things which the artist cannot do, and some which are not worth doing. He works within these bounds. And the sense of being unable to do certain things drives him ever more deeply into the study of what is possible. It is a challenge, and his response is to make a pattern. He invents a form, a shape, a character, a design, which defeats the impossible by making it irrelevant. Where nothing seems to be impossible it is difficult for form to emerge.

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Form, in Art, is constantly changing, as the tools improve and the field widens. But it is always there, and always must be there, for it is the very essence of the whole business. The fewer, the more primitive, the tools, the more rigid the form: the more limited the medium, the greater the compensation sought in pattern.

For twenty years the silent film, developing inside its inherent limitations, had been making progress towards its own kind of form and shape. Sound was denied to it; therefore its tendency was to make sound irrelevant. Obligated to rely upon the eye alone, it was exploring the field of visual experience, and learning how to reject all material which could not be treated visually. Captions were disappearing. The picture was less and less liable to be interrupted by printed placards, telling the audience what was happening and what the characters were saying to one another. A technique had been evolved which could largely dispense with them. Actors emerged who felt no need of speech. Charlie Chaplin, for instance, felt the need of it so little that, when the sound film was invented, he refused the new tool and continued, for many years, to act silently. For him, as for all great artists, the limitation had become the inspiration: the impossible was also the superfluous. Truth, for him, was not to be found in speech.

A comparison of pictures made in 1906 with those made in 1926 will immediately demonstrate how fast human beings were catching up with the machine; how intelligence and imagination were getting to work with a new tool. It is true that the mechanics also improves. The pictures of 1926 do not wink and blink and jerk, as do those of 1906. Better cameras, projectors, lighting, and apparatus of all sorts had

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been introduced. But the progress in the mechanical element is small compared with the progress in the human element, in treatment and cutting, in the ground covered by actors and directors. The actors in the earliest pictures were ridiculous, not because they were badly photographed, but because they did not understand the first principles of screen acting. They were stage actors playing at dumb crambo; at every turn they were hampered because they could not speak. And they tried, by a violent multiplicity of gesture, to make up for the dialogue which had been denied to them.

One of the earliest screen dramas, shown now as a "museum piece," contains a scene between a Roman Patrician and a Christian Maiden who is awaiting martyrdom in the amphitheatre. He wishes to persuade her to recant and marry him. Both parts were played by skilled actors, artists on the three-dimensional stage. But their performance would have disgraced a charade in the nursery.

He flings his hands out persuasively, a great many times.

She shakes her head vehemently and points upwards.

He shrugs his shoulders.

She makes the Sign of the Cross.

He joins his hands in earnest entreaty.

Again she shakes her head and points upwards.

He takes to looking upwards too.

He falls on his knees and begins to pat his own head, in order to indicate that he desires immediate baptism.

She smiles and nods repeatedly.

The lions, to whom this tongue-tied pair were eventually thrown, were far better screen actors because they felt no wish to talk. Human beings were reduced to the level of Robinson Crusoe and Man Friday, conversing by signs and

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pointing down their own throats to show that they were hungry.

Yet we have often known that Charlie was hungry, though he did not point down his own throat and no caption informed us of the fact. Our fellow-creatures tell us an infinite number of things about themselves, without words and without Man Friday gestures, had we but eyes to see. Hungry men do not invariably announce that they starve, yet they can be recognized. So can lovers, any day of the week. Direct verbal statements are crude and often misleading. Very few people reveal themselves in what they say. They are not capable of defining their thoughts and feelings with any degree of accuracy. Or, if they are, they generally prefer to keep their mouths shut. A frightened man may speak bravely; it is only by small involuntary gestures that he betrays himself. He yawns, not because he is sleepy, but in a reflex action from nervous tension. Little boys, going in to bat in a house match, yawn as they stroll nonchalantly out across the pitch. The company assembled in a dentist's waiting-room may rustle the illustrated weeklies with outward calm, but the silence is punctuated by enormous yawns. Privates John Bates, Alexander Court and Michael Williams, grumbling, joking, and arguing in undertones as they waited for day to break over the field of Agincourt, may have had a great deal to say for themselves, but nothing more eloquent than the yawns which probably filled up the pauses.

In fact, all the *brou-haha* of the spoken word often obscures truth instead of revealing it. And deaf people, who must rely upon their eyes, are sometimes abnormally sensitive to the emotional atmosphere around them.

These were truths which the silent film had begun to

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explore in the years between 1906 and 1926. It treated speech as something superfluous. It concentrated upon all those other ways in which humanity reveals itself. It asked the public to use its eyes, to develop some of the extra visual sensibility of the deaf, and the public was beginning to respond.

Captions and clumsy symbolism were discarded as film acting drew nearer to truth. In 1912 an innocent young girl was always obliged to go about hugging an armful of lilies, at any rate in the earlier sequences of the picture, in order that the audience might know just exactly what sort of girl she was. If, on first catching sight of the villain, she dropped these lilies, and if he was subsequently seen to trample on them, the public again knew what to expect: nobody was surprised to see her, after a suitable time lapse, wandering in the snow with a little shawled bundle in her arms. By 1926 these devices were out of date. They were no longer necessary, because the acting was nearer to truth and audiences were quicker in the uptake. Screen actresses had learnt how to look, approximately, like inexperienced girls; the public was more ready to recognize an unsophisticated girl when it saw one. Both had come to realize that such a girl, even if she can speak, does not go about the world loudly proclaiming her own inexperience. Far from it. She is probably consumed by the ambition to be thought extremely sophisticated, and it would be a great mistake to listen to the little dear. Her conversation is intended to convince the world that she is the Scarlet Woman. But her eyes, her mouth, her hands, her feet, the majestic poise with which she conceals her inner uncertainties, the little hops and skips into which she lapses when she is off her guard—these proclaim her for what she is.

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After twenty years the art of the silent film was still only in its infancy. It was still crude. But it was developing, and the response, the awareness, of the public was developing too. Things easily perceived and understood by the average film fan in 1926 would have passed right over his head in 1912. Moreover this art had already become, in some degree, esoteric. The average film fan could take points which were imperceptible to people who seldom visited the cinema.

In the early days, the dumb-crambo days, many intelligent, cultivated, sensitive people rushed to the conclusion that art could never emerge from moving pictures. Moved by curiosity, they visited the cinema once or twice, admitted its marvellous ingenuity, and then decided that they had no more time to waste on it. They could not believe that it would ever become a vehicle of truth or beauty. What they had seen was crude, childish and ridiculous. Even as a joke it palled.

For many years they never went near a picture house and derided those who did. They continued to cultivate their imaginations, intellects and sensibilities in other ways. But, in the nine teen-twenties, they began to drift back to the cinema, lured by the genius of Chaplin and other great comedians, and prepared to scoff at anything which was not farce. They still found much at which to scoff. The thing was still crude, childish and ridiculous. But it was something else. It had developed, in the interval, a kind of subtlety which was new to them and which they could not always follow, for all their superiority of taste.

"They ask so much of the imagination," complained one old gentleman, who would never have grumbled at the imaginative demands made by any other form of art. "I suppose if you see the things often enough you get a sort of knack. I

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must say, I could follow it better when they used to throw words on the screen to tell us what had happened."

The ground covered in twenty years had been considerable. How the silent film would have developed, and what it would have been to-day, is now merely a matter for speculation. For, in the late nineteen-twenties, Science discovered something more. Sound was added to sight. The machine once more took charge of the artist, and a discarded element had to be reintroduced into the pattern.

### 2

Of all the guests assembled at that luncheon party, the authors had most to hope and least to fear. Their own profession was not seriously threatened. Nobody had gone so far as to suggest that Talking Films might kill the circulating library.

Authors' film rights had been a valuable subsidiary source of income for several years, and there seemed to be no likelihood that the demand for stories would diminish. But hitherto the author had been chiefly concerned with the sale of his material and had had little to do with the retelling of his story in the new medium. He might be invited to collaborate in alterations to the story line, or to edit the captions, but he could not have much say in a business where the technique so essentially differed from his own. Many authors deliberately abstained from ever seeing the film versions of their books, taking it for granted that little or nothing of their original conception would survive. Words were their medium. Their art lay in the manipulation of words, both in dialogue and

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narrative. They could not avoid a certain distrust for a form of story telling which had dispensed with words.

Now however the case was altered. Words were going to be needed again. Screen characters were going to talk. It seemed likely that word experts would be called in. Authors began to hope that their special technical experience might be hired out very profitably.

Hired out it was, on a scale so lavish as to astonish even their agents. Hollywood briefed them recklessly; it was no rare thing to find three or four distinguished novelists and playwrights at work upon one story. They were hired on the strength of their success in their own craft, and not because they had had any previous interest in, or experience of, picture-making. For a certain number of days, weeks or months they worked on the script. Frequently they disliked one another, and sometimes they never even met. As the shooting date drew nearer, and the script became more chaotic, more authors were called in. Nor did this period of activity come to an end because the script was ready, or because anybody concerned was satisfied with it. Only when the picture had to go on the floor did it stop. During the last available twenty-four hours some *Eminence Grise*, who lurks unseen in every studio, produces a shooting script.

The shooting script is a kind of lucky dip. It resembles no previous script but has traces of half-a-dozen earlier versions scattered over it. Screen credit for the authors is assured to them under their contracts, but most of them are secretly determined to disown it in the Last Day.

It may seem surprising that distinguished novelists and playwrights should have submitted to such treatment. The very

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high pay is not the only explanation. Screen work was a new and amusing experience to many of them, and some became genuinely interested and anxious to explore the possibilities of this new medium. The more conscientious suffered severe twinges, for they had really made some effort to understand what it was that they were required to do, and nobody could tell them, for nobody knew. They did not like to take money and credit when not a line of their dialogue, not one of their suggestions, had survived in the shooting script. Nor could they ever be quite sure whether their material was rejected because it was unsuitable or simply because "these silly people don't even know their own silly business."

Others became excessively knowing and acquired a technical vocabulary which should have impressed the camera man, if any camera man ever read a script. They knew all about panning and tracking, and were careful to distinguish between a dissolve and a fade-out. But in the final lucky dip they seldom fared better than their colleagues.

"I think I could do it all very well," said an elderly novelist who had been engaged to work on her first screen adaptation, "if it wasn't for this Continuation they keep talking about. But I am to have a Continuation Expert to help me,"

By this she meant Continuity, a bugbear which haunted all authors at that time. We hear less of it nowadays; in fact it is growing so old-fashioned that our younger screen writers will soon be asking what it was. But ten years ago it was regarded as something so mysterious, so highly technical, that nobody outside the Industry could possibly be expected to understand it. When first authors were hired to write scripts they usually found themselves yoked with Continuity Experts, bred in the

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studios, who also wrote scripts but who did not seem to rate as authors.

Continuity merely means the bridging of gaps in time and space. It is the art of informing the audience that the scene has leapt from London to Paris, or that an hour, a week, a month have elapsed in the twinkling of an eye. In the very early days it was thought sufficient to display a caption which said:

PARIS!

And a time lapse was marked by another caption saying:

ONE WEEK LATER.

Subsequently it was felt that these bald little notices broke the illusion. An attempt was made to elaborate them and to infuse them with some emotional significance. They said:

CAME THE DAWN. . . .

Or:

THE PLAYGROUND OF EUROPE—ST. MORITZ.

In the next stage they were eliminated altogether. It was incompatible with the growing artistry of the silent film that the audience should be continually switching from pictures to letter print, from looking to reading. Information of this kind must be conveyed pictorially. When the story moved to Paris, a shot of the Eiffel Tower was inserted. If a week had to elapse, a calendar was shown with a hand coming up and tearing off the leaves.

But then it was felt that these Eiffel Towers and calendars, popping irrelevantly into the picture, were scarcely an im-

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provement on captions. Continuity devices became more elaborate. Efforts were made to weave them into the fabric of the story itself. In 1932 an author received a story outline with the direction: *Emily proceeds to Venice by a suitable continuity device.*

In a mood of ill-judged merriment she asked if the train would be considered a suitable continuity device. She learnt that it would not. For if all the people in screen dramas were to be seen getting into trains every time they go somewhere else, then there would be too many pictures of people getting into trains. But, it was added, this was not a matter which need worry her. A continuity expert would attend to it. And the continuity expert took Emily for a ride in a punt at Henley, and then dissolved the punt, with Emily in it, into a gondola, and that was a continuity device. But the story had to be knocked about considerably in order to lure Emily into the punt.

All this, in its turn, became old-fashioned a year or two later. Script Managers discovered that elaborate continuity devices were unnecessary. Something much more abrupt and natural would suffice, after all. Why, anyway, did Emily go to Venice? Not to ride in a gondola but to see her dying mother. The audience is interested in Emily, not geography. It will be quite sufficient to cut from a picture of Emily snatching up a suitcase to a picture of a table, covered with medicine bottles.

*Somebody ill I* Says the audience. *This must be Mother in that foreign place. Yes! There she is . . . lying in bed. Coo! Doesn't she look bad? Emily will be properly upset to find her like this. Who's this? A nun? Ah, they have nuns to nurse them in foreign places. This must be this place Venice and soon we shall see Emily coming. . .*

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These developments sprang from a growing sensitiveness to the reactions of the audience, a more accurate power to forecast what the audience will think and feel. With the power to forecast came the artist's desire, and the artist's skill, to control these reactions, to rivet attention on the essential and significant. If Emily is the theme, then the purpose of every object shown to the audience must be to excite more and more interest in Emily. In the earliest pictures it would have been quite possible to see Emily's face registering terror, with open mouth and staring eyeballs, at some perfectly unexplained cause. The effect of this was to make us want to leave off looking at Emily. It filled us with curiosity to know what had frightened her so much and we wanted to see it too. The picture would then shift to a herd of maddened buffaloes, charging down the gorge. After this interruption it would go back, with somewhat diminished impetus, to Emily. In a modern picture these shots would almost certainly be reversed. We would see Emily strolling all unconscious down the gorge. We would then see the buffaloes, realize her danger, and immediately feel a strong desire to see Emily again and watch her as she realizes it too. The sight of her terrified face has then a double effect, as it fulfils a wish already in our minds.

We may believe that we wish to see Emily because she is our favourite star. We do not realize how much this wish has been stimulated by a transposition of shots. Her acting and personality would have been handicapped in the earlier sequence. The later sequence enhances them.

The Industry, having taken thirty-five years to make all these discoveries, was naturally inclined to regard them as technical mysteries, very difficult for a newcomer to under-

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stand. At least another thirty-five years must elapse before authors could be trusted to grasp them. Even to-day an author is only reluctantly permitted to undertake entire responsibility for a script. He may have had ten years' experience, he may have a dozen scripts to his credit, but he is still offered the services of some stripling who will explain to him the dangers of a time lapse and make sure that he gets Emily and the buffaloes in the right order.

Authors are called in by the Industry to do three things: (i) To adapt novels, plays, biography and other material for the screen. (2) To supply dialogue. (3) To write original stories. They are sometimes asked for an adaptation without dialogue and are frequently asked for dialogue alone. They might also be asked for an original story without dialogue. Jane Austen, had she lived to-day, might have been asked to supply the "story" of *Pride and Prejudice* without any of the characterization, any of the idiomatic touches, which lie in her dialogue. *Mr. Collins proposes to Elizabeth* would have been thought sufficient. No more from her, as an artist, would have been required. And the actual proposal of Mr. Collins might then have been written by Mr. Ernest Hemmingway. Nor is this all. She might well be asked to supply the story with dialogue, and, in the shooting script, half of her original dialogue might be retained and the other half might have been rewritten by Mr. P. G. Wodehouse, Mr. Charles Morgan and Miss Stevie Smith, if her employers could secure their services.

To playwrights and novelists this may seem fantastic. But it is very natural that dialogue should not be rated highly  
twenty years learning how to

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do without it, and who never asked to have it put back into the pattern. Back it is, but its relative importance is still undetermined. For emphasis, in the talking picture, is still visual rather than aural. It is not a duet of sight and sound. Disney, in some of his later cartoons, especially *Fantasia*, has made experiments in this direction. He has tried to create such a duet by dint of the extreme simplification of cartoon drawing, which makes a comparatively small demand upon the eye. But, even so, many people found that the simultaneous demands upon eye and ear were too much for them—that if they looked they could not listen and if they listened they could not look.

It may be that the public will catch up with Disney; the human race may, in a year or two, develop new faculties of co-ordinated attention. Or perhaps Disney may experiment upon lines of still greater simplification until he has discovered how much the average human being can see and hear simultaneously. But all these experiments will only carry the art of the moving cartoon still further away from the art of the moving photograph, which frankly subordinates the ear to the eye.

### *Adaptations.*

In the case of a novel this means cutting out a great deal of material and turning comment into action. Where the novelist explains, the film must exhibit. The screen writer must find a dramatic visual substitute for a passage like this:

"Thus we see her in a strange state of isolation. To have lost the God-like conceit that we may do what we will, and not to have acquired a homely zest for doing what we can, shows a grandeur of temper which . . . forswears compromise.

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But, if congenial to philosophy, it is apt to be dangerous to the Commonwealth." (EUSTACIA VYE in the *Return of the Native*.)

This is not as difficult as might at first appear. Such a character is not uncommon. Many people in the audience may have met such a woman, and summed her up, though not quite in the same words. *She cries for the moon, they might say, and nothing else will satisfy her. It's impossible to argue with such people and they make a lot of trouble.* They will recognize the type, when they meet it on the screen, if something about the woman reminds them of old Aunt Isobel, who eventually grew so impossible that she had to be shut up. Aunt Isobel would march straight through ponds and rivers, straight past notices which told her to keep off the grass or beware of the bull, and, when she came to a nine-foot brick wall which she *could* not climb, she just sat down and screamed. If Eustacia is seen doing something of the sort, on her first appearance in the picture, she will be recognized as an incipient Isobel.

The author must devise these slight, natural, easily recognized indications of type. And, in any case, he must try to explain to his employers the meaning of such a passage. For he is working with people who seldom read, who have a profound and intelligible mistrust of the written word. That is one of the reasons why he has been called in. He is accustomed to take the written word quite seriously, and he will tell them what is in the book.

"I don't get this girl, this Eustacia Vye," they will say. "Why did she act that way? What sort of girl was she? How do you see her, Mr. Scribble?"

"Like your Aunt Isobel," says Scribble, if he knows his job. As soon as this is clear they may possibly show more

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ingenuity than he does in devising signposts which shall direct the memory of the audience to its own Aunt Isobel. But they do not easily recognize a written description of a character. They do not deal in words. They scarcely think in words. Scribble, whose profession it is to manipulate words, who is never satisfied until he has found the *mot juste*, may jump to the conclusion that there is no such thing as wordless cerebration, and that the Industry does not, cannot, think. He is completely wrong. But the thought processes of the Industry must always be a profound mystery to him.

Here is a true story. An actor once held up all activity on the floor for half an hour while he complained that one of his lines was out of character. He was playing an impoverished aristocrat showing the heroine round his house and apologizing for its disorder. The line was: *You see, there has been no lady in the house since my mother died.* He maintained that *lady* was quite wrong; *no woman in the house* would be more natural. What? said the Industry. Call his mother a woman? Surely not? The man was an aristocrat!

The argument grew heated. Scribble, who was present, supported the actor. He said bitterly that woman had been the word in his script, but that some so-and-so had altered it to lady in the shooting script. But he merely embittered the contest by flourishing the Old School Tie, and asserting that all Etonians call their mothers women. Whereupon those present who did not happen to have been educated at Eton came out strongly on the side of lady. At last the actor solved the problem by demanding a Bible.

After a good deal of agitation and telephoning, just as a lorry was about to set out for London with orders to bring back a gross of Bibles, news went round that there was one,

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actually in the studio. It belonged to somebody's dresser. It was brought to the actor and he looked up a text.

*'Woman, what have I to do with thee? There! You see? Our Lord called His mother a woman. And what was good enough for Our Lord ought to be good enough for anybody.'*

This carried immediate conviction and woman was adopted, to the profound astonishment of Scribble. As an argument, it grows more telling the more one considers it. Here was a controversy on a matter of taste. How are such things ever to be settled? Woman or lady, napkin or serviette—who is to be the arbiter? Can any authority be cited? Was there ever any person whose taste is likely to be accepted as infallible by all sorts and conditions of men? Only one. But Scribble would never have thought of it, in spite of his preoccupation with the *mot juste*.

Generally speaking, literary merit in the material to be adapted greatly hampers the screen writer. The finer the novel or play, the more formidable the difficulties of adaptation. In a great work of art nothing is irrelevant. To cut any part of it is to damage the whole. In a great work of art the medium is so wedded to the subject that it becomes impossible to think of them apart. To take the *writing* out of a great novel is to run a risk of emptying out the baby with the bath. And, if any story has been perfectly told in one medium, what motive can there be for retelling it in another?

Most screen writers prefer to work on an ill-written, second-rate book, towards which they have no conscience, but which has some situation or character which has caught at their imagination. This serves as a *Jew of Malta* to their *Merchant of Venice*. A bald literal translation of some inferior Continental novel is ideal material, provided that the book

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has some tinder in it which will kindle the tow of the storyteller's imagination.

Not infrequently authors are required to retell some foreign novel or play, anglicizing the characters and giving the story an English setting. This is a very tricky business. The characters can speak in a perfectly colloquial idiom, wear English clothes, play cricket and drink tea. But they remain obstinately foreign. Their actions are never quite comprehensible to an English audience.

Very small slips can do a great deal of damage. When the French picture, *Prison Sans Barreaux*, was retold in an English version, the scene was still laid in France, but most of the Gallic flavour was removed, with unhappy results. This was most apparent in a sequence where a cow gave birth to a calf in a byre attached to a sort of female Borstal. By a series of misunderstandings, the prison doctor was called in and remained closeted in the byre for most of the night, with one of the inmates of the prison, a young girl of seventeen; and this *tete-a-tete* was too much for his discretion. In the French version this girl wore a long black dress and clutched round her thin shoulders a little white shawl, the kind of shawl that Frenchwomen are fond of wearing in emergencies, because emergencies are often so draughty. Its "foreignness" carried off the unlikelihood of such an incident. They do so many queer things on the Continent. In a French reformatory, one thought, it is perhaps possible that the *pensionnaires* are allowed to spend their nights in byres, alone with attractive young men. But in the English version she wore a business-like white linen coat, and the whole incident became incredible. The authorities who provided that coat would never have allowed such a thing to happen.

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The great difficulty, in such adaptations, is the translation of sentiment. The material is rarely first-rate and its popularity in its own country has therefore been largely sentimental. And, just as the sentiment of one generation becomes the laughing-stock of the next, so does the sentiment of one nation leave another cold. Characters created on a purely sentimental formula have often no appeal save for a local and temporary public. And sometimes they will take the grand tour; out-moded in their country they will find a new public elsewhere. Our grandfathers wept over Little Nell. We mock at her. But she is said to have had a tremendous vogue in Russia in the nineteen-twenties.

Some years ago an English author was discussing with a Central European director the plot of a Hungarian novel which he wished her to transpose into English suburban life. She complained that there was not one passably decent character in the book. They all acted solely from motives of greed, appetite, cowardice, or self-interest, they showed the most complete callousness in their attitude to one another and seemed to be entirely devoid of any sense of responsibility or moral obligation. She feared that they might be thought unsympathetic and asked if the story might not be altered a little. Could they not behave rather less badly? Might not extenuating circumstances be introduced? Might it not at least be possible for some of them to show signs of distress, scruple, or inner conflict?

The director said coldly:

"That is your British hypocrisy. In my country an audience interests himself in a girl who has stealed five pounds because she is wanting a new hat. In your country she must have **stealed for bread for her old grandmother.**"

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"Perhaps," said Miss Scribble, somewhat nettled. "But I really do think I had better turn some of these cads into hypocrites."

"Wass heisst cads?"

"Cads? Oh, well . . . all the people in this book are cads."

"So? Then everybody is cad."

"That is a very sentimental thing to say."

"If you will excuse, it is you that I find sentimental. If you wish, I am cynic."

Miss Scribble heatedly asserted that there is not a pin to choose between cynicism and sentimentality. Both are ways of dodging truth. Both spring from timidity and conceit.

"Both have the lie in the soul," said she, "and if one stinks of moral cant, the other stinks of intellectual cant."

This tirade achieved an unexpected and undeserved success. The director's English was scanty but he did recognize one word which he had often heard in Hollywood. His integrity, as a cynic, wavered.

"It will stink?" he said anxiously. "Why aren't you telling me this before? If it will stink the story must be altered so."

British sentiment and, if we are to judge by the pictures which come to us from the United States, American sentiment is of the kind which appeals to extroverts. We like a conflict, hearts of gold, and a happy ending. We like to see men challenging fate and battling with circumstances. We like to see good triumph over evil. We overs tress, perhaps, the importance of action, and we like to believe that some kindly Providence will always intervene to make sure that "the Boy gets the Girl and the dough." We do not want to see the real world but a world "remoulded nearer to the heart's desire."

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European sentiment, in many countries during the past twenty years, has often been defeatist and fatalist. It dwells on the futility of action and shows men as the helpless pawns of circumstance. This has found frequent expression in the *Little Victim* theme, in stories of cruelty to children, such as *Madchen in Uniform*, *Toil de Carotte*, *Maternite*, and in numerous stories of prisons and convicts. These spectacles of unbridled injustice, oppression and sadism, of children mishandled, of confidence and innocence betrayed, have generally been somewhat misunderstood by English audiences. They have been received as stern human documents, scarcely to be rated as entertainment, and their realism has been commended by people who imagine that sentimentality always wears rose-coloured spectacles. But these subjects can evoke a purely sentimental response—luxurious tears and a cosy sense that we are all poor things and all bound to get a raw deal. People who regard themselves as victims like pictures about victimization. They can feel with the victim and, at the same time, somewhat perversely revel in the power of the oppressor. They do not want to see good triumph over evil. That has not been their own experience and they are unwilling to believe that anyone, anywhere, is getting a better deal. They too do not want to see the real world. They would rather see something a little worse than the truth. But this brand of sentimentality, though nearly all the *Little Victim* pictures were intended to purvey it, completely misses fire with an English audience. Extroverts invariably begin to ask why somebody did not interfere? In most of these stories there are one or two kindly characters, nurses, warders, teachers, doctors or priests, who see and deplore what is going on, but who never seem to have heard of the National Society for the Prevention

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of Cruelty to Children. An English audience sits waiting impatiently for somebody to do something and goes away feeling that they cannot have got any N.S.P.C.C. in these foreign places.

This fact is so well known that such films are generally modified before they are sent to London. The final sequences are re-shot. Somebody does interfere, at the last moment, and a perfunctory happy ending is tacked on as a concession to "British sentimentality." The version of *Mädchen in Uniform* shown everywhere on the Continent ended with a tortured child leaping from the top of a building to lie, mangled and dead, at the feet of the fiendish head mistress. But a special version was made for England, in which her schoolmates pulled her back into safety and the sympathetic junior mistress, on whom our hopes had been vainly fixed throughout the picture, and who had been a passive spectator of the scene, observed smugly: *A great tragedy has been averted.*

The adaptation of a stage play presents a new series of problems. To indicate character is a comparatively simple matter, for the dramatist has already done a good deal of the work. Unlike the novelist, he has been obliged to forgo the advantage of telling the audience about his characters, and has manoeuvred them into revealing themselves. Also there is less material to be cut. Expansion rather than compression is the problem; the task is to break up a form which hampers screen narrative. Scenes which, in the play, all took place in one room now more naturally occur in different parts of the house. The characters can be sent out of the house to play cricket, as in *Quiet Wedding*. Incidents which the dramatist has been obliged to indicate as happening "off" must be

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brought back into the story, since very few things can be allowed to happen off on the screen.

The whole build up of the scenes and acts must be broken until no trace of it remains. For the film, like life, has neither curtains nor intervals. It goes right on. Each act, in a play, is built up so as to lead to a climax and a curtain, upon which the audience is content to pause and to be told nothing more for ten' minutes. The intervals have their place in the rhythm of a play. But in a film this climax must be so treated that the audience is prepared to go on without a pause. Each scene, in a play, is shaped as a stepping-stone to the climax, therefore each scene must be reshaped. In a film there are no exits and entrances. An actor does not make an exit from the picture; the picture moves away from him. And stage dialogue, though it has some superficial resemblance to screen dialogue, can seldom be transposed without great alteration in emphasis.

### *Dialogue.*

Since they are wordmongers, authors are perhaps entitled to regard themselves as dialogue specialists. And it is true that good dialogue can add greatly to the value of a film, just as a good libretto is of value in an opera. But, where there is so much to engage the eye, the audience does not listen very attentively; dialogue should not demand too much concentration. It should be natural and convincing, but it should be used to illustrate and amplify points which are made in many other ways.

Screen dialogue is much more natural than stage dialogue, for stage actors are obliged to reveal themselves almost entirely by speech. It is true that they support speech by timing, gesture, and expression, but these do not play so

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large a part as they can in a film, where the faces of the actors can be equally well seen by everybody in the audience and where emphasis can be increased by close-ups or changes of shot. A film can show a man talking in a high moral tone, and then call attention to his foot pressing the foot of his neighbour's wife under the table. That man is revealed as a hypocrite without a word of dialogue, by a gesture and a change of shot which makes sure that everyone sees it. Because of this peculiar capacity for emphasizing small but significant things it can afford to be more lifelike than the stage; it can dispense with the over-emphasis upon which stage actors often have to depend in order to get a point across.

It makes a perfectly different use of setting and background. When the curtain goes up on a scene in a theatre the audience immediately takes in the setting, receives the intended impression of luxury, squalor, respectability or bohemianism, and then takes it for granted through the rest of the scene. In a film the setting can be brought forward at any time to reinforce the action. On the stage a woman mourning the death of her child has to be given words to convey the terrible emptiness of her life and heart, in order that the audience may understand why it is that she tries to steal somebody else's child. On the screen a shot of the empty, tidy nursery, with the toys all put away on their shelves, will tell part of this story without any words from her.

Rhetoric is very difficult to manage on the screen, and so are any long intricately built-up speeches. This is partly because of the frequent changes of shot and angle, necessitated by the inherent flatness of the screen. The audience is kept from being irritated by this flatness because the camera goes

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round the subject giving frequent, but slight, variations of distance and angle, so that an illusion of roundness is produced. These shots are so skilfully strung together that the audience is hardly aware of them; but they interrupt the rhythm of long speeches. It would be impossible, for instance, to hold the same shot during the whole of one of Hamlet's soliloquies, and very difficult to synchronize it with a variety of shots. It can be done; but a screen writer should not ask too much of the boys in the cutting-room. If he finds that more than half of *To be or not to be* is gone, he must not jump to the conclusion that this is because they do not appreciate poetry. They may appreciate it so well that they shrink from the task of breaking it up into shots.

Television, which is far more stereoscopic, is a more suitable medium for poetry or rhetoric. If Science should discover something more, in the shape of a stereoscopic screen projector, one shot could be held much longer before an audience would grow tired of it. But, in that case, screen technique would have to be scrapped entirely and we should all have to start all over again. The eye would become quite dizzy, whirled from one scene to another, if it saw all those scenes in the round. The whole of screen technique is based on the fact that a number of objects can be shown to people in rapid succession.

Important or informative screen dialogue should be carried on in short speeches and short sentences. There is no place for the outburst, the torrent of words running up to a climax and a dramatic announcement, which so often heralds a curtain on the stage. These outbursts nearly always have to be "written down" in a screen adaptation. They are not natural. In real life, people do not say: *Oh this is the last straw!*

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*I won't bear it. Vve kept silent for/ears, but now . . . wallah . . . wallah . . . wallah . . . because HE IS MY SON! (Curtain.)* They do not shout for five minutes before coming to the matter nearest their hearts. They begin with it. They say: *He's my son! Yes he is! I've kept quiet about it JOT years, but now this is the last straw . . . wallah . . . wallah . . . wallah. . . .* And they go on and on, repeating themselves and letting fall further items of startling information, until somebody brings them an aspirin.

On the other hand, long discursive monologues, of the kind favoured by Miss Bates, can be very effective on the screen. They can run on like a kind of obbligato accompaniment. There is, in *Femme du Boulanger*, an immensely long drunken monologue by Raimu. It accompanies him from place to place, to church, through the streets, to the presbytery, back to his own bakery; it ranges over a multitude of topics and it is addressed to many different people; it contains no information necessary to the story and there is no one sentence in it which could not quite well be cut. The whole is a most poignant, most convincing utterance of a heart-broken man. To hear it is to be grateful that sound has been brought back into the pattern.

### *Original Stories.*

An author is seldom invited to write an original screen story unless a vehicle is wanted for a particular star. And that task is only tolerable if he happens to have an overwhelming admiration for the star's personality. Unless he himself desires to see nothing save that one face, to hear nothing save that one voice, he will find it hard to write dialogue which is to be treated, for the most part, unilaterally, so that any-

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thing said by actors other than the star will be said by faceless ghosts, while the attention of the audience is concentrated on the star's face listening. In fact he must be convinced that nothing he writes can have any value unless it is interpreted, directly or indirectly, by that one individual.

But any author can, if he is enough of an enthusiast, write an original script, all out of his own head, and try to persuade some company to accept it. Should he succeed in doing this he will be pretty certain to break his heart. For it is only then that he will fully realize how anomalous his position is, and how small the chance that any fraction of his idea will ever find its way to the screen. So long as his task has been merely to adapt other people's material he may manage to accept this fate philosophically. But, where his own creation is concerned, he cannot feel the same detachment. It will come as a bitter blow to him if he finds that some other author has been summoned to alter his story line or touch up his dialogue.

The practice of hiring several authors to work, often quite independently, on the same story is only comprehensible when it is remembered that the Industry is composed of self-contained groups of experts. Each group knows its own job but makes no pretence of knowing much about the jobs of the others. Authors are not regarded as creators. They are merely called upon to supply an ingredient in the pudding. The *chef* is a director whom they may possibly have never met. They are specialists and should stick to their lasts. A Bessarabian novel, by an unknown Mr. Protopopov, has been purchased because it contains material congenial to a Lithuanian star. It is a story about the love of a sophisticated society **woman** for a ploughboy. Mr. Michael Arlen is a specialist

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in sophisticated society women. Miss Sheila Kaye Smith knows all about ploughboys. Therefore it would seem very natural to the Industry to invite them to collaborate on the script, or to ask Miss Kaye Smith to make a treatment and then send it to Mr. Arlen so that he might put in some sophistication. No insult would be intended to either. But these possibilities are intolerable to the author of an original script.

It is true that a few, a very few, authors command sufficient prestige to secure a clause in their contracts stipulating that nothing in their scripts shall be changed. This means that a script written by them, and them alone, lies about on chairs in the studio while the picture is being shot. But that is very often all it means. In the present conditions of picture-making there is no Guardian Angel to watch over the story on its perilous journey from script to screen. No clause in any contract can ensure that the author's true conception will survive.

Much has been said of the changes which can overtake a play during production. A group gets to work on it and each person in that group has a slightly different idea of what it ought to be. The author continually finds that the emphasis is altered, that serious scenes are being played for comedy, that comic scenes are being treated very solemnly, and that the wrong character is walking away with the play. But this is negligible in comparison with what can happen to a screen story by the time that directors, art directors, actors, cameramen, sound technicians, and cutters have done with it.

Even if all these gentry were willing and anxious to carry out the author's ideas (and many of them are) he has no established means of communicating with them or of explain-

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ing what he wants. He has some sort of position in the theatre. Everybody knows who and what he is. But he has none in the studio. There is his script, lying about on chairs. But no script, however persuasive, can convey his ideas to a community which never reads. So long as the poor fellow confines himself to setting down his ideas on paper, he may as well stick to dialogue assignments, or to adapting Bessarabian novels for Lithuanian stars.

### 3

And why, it may here be asked, should any author ever want to write an original script? It is true that the art of the screen is daily becoming more beautiful, more subtle, and more significant; that pictures are being made which challenge the most critical standards. But what does the screen offer to the story teller which the novel and the play do not offer? As a medium, has it any unique advantages?

It has, in the first place, an arbitrary power over the attention of its audience which no other story-telling medium can exert. It can completely exclude the irrelevant and decide absolutely what is to be seen and heard.

It has an unlimited range of emphasis: an emphasis which can be intolerably crude but which can also be infinitely subtle. It can call attention at any moment to any object, indicate a contrast, or build up an association of ideas. Its power to suggest, rather than to state, is limited of course by the degree of suggestibility in the public, but that is a limitation which applies to every medium. At present the common denominator of suggestibility may be low, because the art is

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still in its infancy and has to create its own public as it develops. But the unexplored regions in this field are vast and fascinating.

The screen is more natural and lifelike than the stage, and it has a greater freedom of movement in time and space. It is more dramatic than the novel. It can suggest, in a few seconds, things which the novelist must take many pages to describe. It has the apparatus for saying what cannot be said *in words*. What the novelist is forced to make explicit, the film can merely imply.

It can, for instance, show how the same person, the same scene, can appear quite differently to different people. It can show the world as seen by two lovers, dining together in a popular restaurant,—a noble hall, vast, commodious and beautifully decorated, faultless service, exquisite music, and themselves, superbly handsome in one another's eyes, the centre of the scene. The picture carries us from their minds to the mind of a jaundiced old gentleman sitting at the next table. The camera becomes his eye instead of theirs. And simply by dint of ingenious photography, by a change in angles, shots and lighting, by emphasis on other details, the same scene appears quite differently. A shabby, awkward boy and his fat sweetheart are munching a bad dinner in a tawdry, overcrowded room, where the waiters have dirty hands and the band plays out of tune.

It can show how the same scene appears quite differently to one person on different occasions: it can carry us from the mind of childhood to the mind of middle age and show how the vast lake, the mysterious forest, and the lofty mountain can shrink, in later years, to a small duckpond, a copse and a hillock.

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It can indicate those variations of pace, those deviations in our sense of time, of which we are hardly conscious, but which are implicit in all our emotions. For it is a fact that we seldom live at the same pace for two consecutive hours. Whatever our watches may tell us, we know that an hour spent with a bore is ten times longer than an hour spent with our heart's choice. The pace quickens as we grow older. The days of childhood are endless. In middle age the weeks rattle past like telegraph posts beside a train. When we say, of a recent event: *How long ago that seems!* we mean that intervening emotional experiences have set a wide gulf between then and now. When we say, of a long-past event: *Why! It seems only yesterday!* we mean that the emotional gap, in this respect, is small. To many people nowadays the year 1937 must seem as remote as the flood. But a happy couple, celebrating their golden wedding, may still feel that they have only just got back from their honeymoon because their love, during fifty years, has remained unchanged.

The more violent the emotion, the more erratic does our time sense become. Anyone who has been through a car or railway accident will testify to this. Between the moment when a crash is seen to be inevitable and the moment when it actually occurs there may be a time lapse of a few seconds. To the people concerned it may seem like a hundred years. Very slowly the two cars creep towards one another. There appears to be ample opportunity for everyone to get out, walk home, eat a good supper, and go to bed. *It was like a slow motion picture*, they say, when describing the experience afterwards. Or they may have had the reverse impression. *Everything seemed to happen at once*, they say, meaning that a number of things happened consecutively but that their own

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emotional state was such that they were unaware of any time lapses at all.

Most people would declare that these are illusions; that the rational conception of time, as something measured out to us by the Greenwich Observatory, is the true conception. But many, having said this, will go to church and sing, with perfect conviction: *A thousand ages in Thy sight Are like an evening gone.* This statement ignores Greenwich completely and suggests that our emotional illusions about time do really bring us nearer to ultimate truth than do our rational faculties.

This see-saw in our dual conception of time is one of:

. . . those obstinate questionings  
Of sense and outward things,  
Fallings from us, vanishings;  
Blank misgivings of a creature  
Moving about in worlds not realized . . .  
Which, be they what they may,  
Are yet the fountain light of all our day,  
Are yet a master light of all our seeing;  
Uphold us, cherish, and have power to make  
Our noisy years seem moments in the being  
Of the eternal silence: truths that wake,  
To perish never. . . .

There can be no higher function for Art than to concern itself with those truths which perish never, and to stress those obstinate questionings. No human activity can properly be described as an art unless it can do this. For, surely, it is those very questionings which have driven men, in all ages, to break out into art—to seek for a harmony, a design, a rhythm, which they desire and which they do not find in sense and outward things.

In the matter of our double time sense, the film can suggest

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for more than a play or a novel simply by turning a handle at a varying pace, by making things happen more quickly or more slowly, so that we are aware of that rhythm in our lives which defies both reason and the clock. This is a field which has been as yet scarcely explored, but it surely will be. Experiments were made, even in the days of the silent film, in such pictures as *Warning Shadows*, And a very effective use of varying pace was made in the opening sequence of *Carnet de Bal*, where a woman is recollecting her youth and her first ball. Everything is a little slower than normal life; in a fairy-like ballroom, with snowy pillars and regal chandeliers, a long row of white-clad girls stands waiting . . . the long row of beautiful young men advances step by step . . . each couple, moving as if half in a dream, begins to waltz. The effect is one of timeless ecstasy, with all life, all the years, still to come, still to be enjoyed.

Towards the end of the picture she returns to the same town and the same hall, and dances there, for old time's sake, with one of her former *beaux*, now a prosperous barber and the father of a large family. The hall is a tawdry, dingy place, only half its remembered size. Sulky girls sit waiting for partners. The dancers trot round and round perfunctorily. But among them, for a moment, she catches a glimpse of a ghost, a young girl in a white dress, and across the screen waltz those other feet, moving in a slower rhythm.

But the greatest advantage of the screen medium is a power which it shares with poetry to fuse humanity with its setting, to charge even inanimate objects with emotional significance.

It can show the entrance to a hospital, with one of those wooden bars which swing to and fro, as the people go in and

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out, full of their own cares and fears. A woman appears—a woman whose story we know. Someone she loves has just died in the hospital. She walks straight down the steps, pushes through the barrier, and passes swiftly out of the picture. The camera holds the wooden bar which swings, after she has passed, backwards and forwards, until it comes to rest. Like rings spreading out on water, when a stone is thrown into a pool, this movement can amplify the significance of the sorrow which has passed by, can remind us that she is not the first, nor will she be the last, to set that bar swinging.

This is poetry. Only a poet can do this with a piece of wood. In this way does a poet achieve that touch of universality which is essential if pathos is to be raised to tragedy. In any story of individual suffering there must be a point at which we feel that it touches some greater theme: not so much that this is the common lot as that this is part of something greater than any one person's lot, that it has echoes of "the still, sad music of humanity." If we cannot be made to feel this, if we are not lifted on the wings of poetry, a spectacle of suffering becomes simply painful and constricting. It does not elevate our minds or expand our hearts.

Poetry has this power to enlarge the individual by catching up, into his emotional orbit, so much that we usually think of as outside ourselves, as inanimate and insensible. When Wordsworth's Lucy died, the whole vast, turning earth had for him but one significance. It was a grave for Lucy.

No motion has she now, no force,  
She neither hears nor sees:  
Rolled round in earth's diurnal course  
With rocks and stones and trees.

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Very little screen poetry has been made as yet. Fifty years of experiment have not lifted this new art much above the level of prose. But it is possible to hope that, at the end of another fifty years, poets may have taken to making pictures. And when they do, then at last full use will be made of the medium, with its suggestive subtlety, its rhythm, its deliberate variation of pace, its complete exclusion of anything outside the pattern.

Poets have already written some very good scripts. Here is one which could be shot as it stands. It is a sequence showing the escape of two lovers from a castle full of enemies; they are living in terms of obstacles and dangers, so that every lamp is a menace, every fluttering curtain a threat.

Down the wide stairs a darkling way they found.  
In all the house was heard no human sound.

A chain dropped lamp was flickering by each door.

The arras, rich with horseman, hawk and hound,  
Fluttered in the besieging wind's uproar;

And the long carpets rose along the gusty floor.

They glide, like phantoms, into the wide hall;  
Like phantoms to the iron porch they glide;

There lay the porter in uneasy sprawl,

With a huge empty flagon by his side.

The wakeful bloodhound rose and shook his hide,  
But his sagacious eye an inmate owns:

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By one, and one, the bolts full easy slide

The chains lie silent on the footworn stones.

The key turns,

and the door upon its hinges groans.

And they are gone. . . .

### 4

But there is really no such thing as screen *writing*. A script is not meant to be read, as novels, poems and plays are read. It is no more a work of literature than is the recipe for a pudding. So long as the meaning is grasped, and the recipe followed, it would serve its purpose if it were written in pidgin-English. The trouble is that the recipe is never followed; the orchestra never plays the notes which the composer has set down.

But the screen can tell a story. And story tellers have, for some hundreds of years, made use of the written word; so that there is still a tendency to call all story tellers writers.

The wholesale buying up of novels and plays must be only a phase in the development of screen story telling. Why should the Industry send out for its material in this manner? Simply because it has, as yet, so few screen composers of its own. Most story tellers still prefer to say what they have to say in some other medium, in spite of the possibilities offered to them by the screen.

And why is this?

It is because the conditions of screen story telling are, at

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present, so discouraging to any genuine artist. The screen composer has no place in the scheme of things, no means of carrying his vision of life and truth safely through this dog-fight of technicians. Nor has he any position in the cutting-room, where the emphasis, which is the true soul of his story, will be determined.

A picture must be a group production, just as operas, symphonies and plays are group productions. But no group production can ever be classed as a great work of art unless it has the stamp of one predominating, creative mind. This single signature, in screen art, is at present the signature of the director. And, while this is the case, no screen-Keats is ever likely to supply scripts.

It may be asked why directors do not take to writing their own stories. They are fine artists. Why should they be content with such unsatisfactory material? Surely they could themselves turn out something better than the mangled remains of a Bessarabian novel, chewed over by half a dozen Scribbles? Why should not one of them turn poet and write his own script?

The answer is probably that they would if they could but they can't. As well might it be suggested that Toscanini and Beecham, since they are fine artists, ought to be able to compose their own symphonies. The art of direction, of ruling groups of people and inducing them to supply certain effects, does not often co-exist with that contemplative faculty which is essential to a poet. For poets are seldom at their best when bellowing through a megaphone. They do not like crowds; they have no special talent for leadership or organization. They like to lead quiet lives in the country, or in small university towns. They need regular meals and a good deal of sleep.

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But a director lives in the arena. He often has to do without sleep for weeks on end, and subsists on ham sandwiches, gulped down between spells at the megaphone.

If screen poetry should ever reach the heights destined for it, perhaps the supremacy of directorship may turn out to have been a passing phase. It may be that in time screen composers will have fought their way into such a position that they can insist on their own signature. That is to say, they will write their score, their recipe, turn it over to a director to be shot, and supervise the cutting personally, so as to secure that particular design, rhythm and emphasis upon which their poetry depends. They would have to learn how to be cutters as an essential part of their training. The director's rôle would more nearly approximate to that of the conductor of an orchestra.

Such a development seems, at the moment, to be impossible. The immense cost of picture making stands in its way and hampers experiment. Screen art is obliged to serve a very large public and must seek a common denominator in taste, and in emotional and intellectual appeal. But many things may operate, as time goes on, to reduce the cost of picture making.

The popularity of the cine-camera, among amateurs, was growing rapidly before the war. In its wake came the home projector. This at present is silent. But a sound projector in every home is not a more fantastic idea than the promise of wireless telegraphy in every home would have seemed thirty years ago. And, when a great many homes have their own projectors, their owners will not be content merely to see the films they have made of themselves surf-bathing last Summer. The buying and hiring of films may grow up, just as the sale of gramophone records has grown up. A vast new

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field would be opened to picture makers. They would be able to deal with the public more directly; they would not have to be governed by the policy or prejudice of distributors. Films of all lengths and kinds, on all subjects, would be demanded: stories, documentaries, nature and travel films. If this new market grows up, the Industry will have to branch out in many ways to supply it.

Films intended for a small audience, a family, possibly only one person, in a dwelling-room, would have to be different from those intended for a crowd in a hall. Anyone who has seen a popular film run through in a small room, for *one* or two spectators, must have noticed how wrong the pitch seems to be. It is directed at something in him which he should share with several hundred people who are not there. But if films for the home are ever produced there will not be this need to seek for, and satisfy, a great common denominator. There will not be one film public but dozens—as many publics as there are for novels or gramophone records. And among these publics the screen-Keats may get his chance.

If the signature of a great poet is ever to be put on a film, some corner in the studio must be found for him and his Ivory Tower; he must have a face and a name and the Industry must recognize him for what he is. But it is difficult at present to guess in which department the materials for that Ivory Tower are being collected.

The practice of hiring "authors" to write for the screen is already on the wane. There is growing up, in the Industry, an increasing supply of screen writers who are not interested in any other form of story telling, who can do all that novelists and playwrights used to do, and who understand much better what is wanted. What original scripts they may keep locked

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away in their desks is best known to themselves; they are generally kept busy on the works of Mr. Protopopov. Their signature is not known to the public, though their names appear in credit titles. But perhaps they may one day produce a screen-Keats.

The notion of an author-cutter, with sufficient authority to sit on a director, is so revolutionary that most screen-writers would reject it. They talk hopefully of their ambition: some-day to make their *own pictures*. But at present the only man who makes pictures is a director. And if they ever become directors they will inevitably find that they are making other people's pictures. Nor is it probable that those of them who might succeed in directorship have got the most interesting screen poetry locked away in their desk drawers. So that it is not certain that our screen-Keats will emerge from the script department.

Perhaps, *one* day, some cutter will grow tired of making patterns out of other people's material, and the mutiny may start at that end of the studio.

Or perhaps some director may desert the arena for the Ivory Tower. He may decide that his art is creative rather than executive. Retaining all his prestige and decisive authority, he may toss his megaphone to some trusted subordinate and quit the hurly-burly of the floor. In his office he will build a sanctuary where he can be vacant and pensive, and cultivate that "inward eye<sup>M</sup> which turns the thing seen into the imagined thing; where he can woo this foundling, this Tenth Muse, this *Dea ex Machina*, of whom we know, at present, so little.











