

FILMS AND FICTION

A letter to a Private Soldier not yet demobilised.

My dear Douglas,

It is almost five years since that Oxford twilight when you and I and David sat over the fire in your rooms at Trinity and talked about Writing—and Life—and of what you would do when the war was over. And now the war is over and you have fought in the desert, and on the beaches, and through the mountain snows and summer plains of Italy, and have never once come home on leave to see for yourself whether we have changed so much and in the same ways as we know you must have changed, because you have lived through the years which change a young man in any case, and which must more powerfully affect one who has been through the phantasmagoria of active service in the longest and most varied of all the war's campaigns.

I remember how, when you left school, you took with you to Oxford a mind divided between the idea of a missionary priesthood and a growing ambition to be a film director: you saw yourself alternatively as a new Father Damien, or as an even more experimental Orson Welles. Neither of these ambitions was mercenary. You wished to serve God and Man in an East End Parish; in a leper colony; in a film studio, and the last of these ways was by no means the easiest. I wonder if *Going My Way* and *The Song of Bernadette* were shown to the troops in Italy and, if so, whether you would have agreed with me that Bing Crosby, carrying moonbeams home in a jar, was more likely to ensnare souls than the lovely sincerity of Jennifer Jones, whose authentic vision was nullified for so many of us by the crude and unimaginative studio decision to make the ineffable concrete. I do not believe that, with your already extensive knowledge of cinema technique, you would have made this queer—almost atheistic—mistake. Werfel's novel, fine and moving as it was, erred, in my opinion, in those passages where the novelist, departing from his ample material, filled in his narrative with invented scenes and dialogues which gave the truth of the tale a gloss of fiction, thus strengthening the materialist's opportunity to dismiss all records of a miracle as the result of collusion—or at best of collective hallucination.

Before I had time to find out how you felt about this, your mother sent me a short story you had written. It described the life and death of a fellow soldier, a man who, like you, had chosen to remain in the ranks because, like you, he had felt the urge to keep in the closest possible contact with the physical realities of warfare.

"I am in the lowest rank of all," you had written of yourself some

months earlier. "I carry up the stuff to feed the guns". This wilful humility had given you the leisure of the obedient whose minds are not burdened with the obligation to issue orders or to prepare for moments of crisis.

Because of this freedom you had been able to face the tests of active service and to consider why one death among so many, should have a peculiar finality; why the death of one man, whom you had not known better or loved more than others, should seem stranger and more arbitrary than the ending of other lives; than the possible imminent termination of your own. And the riddle of death spun round in your mind and, in its turning, brought you face to face with its inseparable companion, the mystery of bodily passion through which life renews itself from generation to generation. The statement of these riddles is the stuff of which great fiction has always been made, and, as I read your short story, I said to myself, 'Douglas has decided to be a novelist'.

There was, however, something wrong with the story as a piece of literature. It was deeply felt; it was quite reasonably well written; it was enhanced by first hand knowledge and observation; it was true to fact, but it had not the final truth of fiction. There was at once too much and too little of it; it was crammed with detail; it was free from the over emphasis of the tyro, except for one passage where reticence would have heightened the effect of the incident related; its age and theme had been given the freshness of a new statement; but the reader was left with that ultimate sense of confusion which follows a vivid dream when the waking mind tries to piece it into a coherent sequence.

Presently the root of the trouble disclosed itself: you had been using the technique of the film for the discussion of a theme with which no film has ever been able to deal. The progress and incidents of war in the mountains; the flashbacks recording the birth and death of an unhappy love affair were all parts of a perfectly good film scenario. Any director could have shot the sequences from the material you provided: but the core of the tale, the progress of the human soul through the valley of destruction, belonged to another art and the narrative of that journey broke down under the weight of the visual record you had forced it to carry. You cannot discuss the Four Last Things by photography: the attempt to do this has always been either a box office or an artistic failure.

Consider, for instance, that very popular novel *Lost Horizon*. A million readers found comfort in the idea of a peace loving, non-commercial community living without fear of disease or wealth beyond the precipitous fastnesses of an Himalayan barrier. The earthly paradise depicted was perhaps a trifle over materialistic for

a work which set out to criticize materialism: but the kingdom of Shangri-La did offer many of us a local habitation for our more creditable daydreams. Then the book was filmed.

So long as we were shown the crowds at the air-port—so long as we shared the growing suspicion and final alarms of the kidnapped passengers in the plane—we were transported by first-class entertainment. The situation, though unusual, was still well within the bounds, not only of belief, but of imagination. Once we reached the earthly paradise, however, the whole thing fell, not to pieces, but into the most stifling treacle of Hollywood banquetry. The slightly carnal aestheticism of the houri who played all the hero's favourite pieces on the supernal piano was vulgarized beyond acceptance, and, when it came to showing us the Presence which dwelt at the heart of the mystery, we were faced, not with the mysterious eyes, white hair and ascetic feature of Conrad Veidt—the one film actor who could have suggested an arch-angelic power and sweetness—but with the toothless mopping and mowing of a sub-human, androgynous gnome. An imaginative novel, good of its kind, had been reduced to unimaginative ugliness.

When you want to know what the Almighty really thinks of money, said La Rochefoucauld, you have only to consider the kind of person to whom he gives the most of it. When you want to gauge the moral and spiritual status of the cinema you have only to consider the depths to which it can degrade a good story, in order to make a million dollars out of it. *The Lost Horizon* as a film was a terrific box-office success.

An illustration of the reverse of the medal was provided a year or two ago by one of the finest films I, who am not a great film-goer, have ever seen. It was called, I believe, *Meet John Doe*. It told how a down and out fell into the clutches of a group of newspaper proprietors who believed that there was money in religion. This man, beautifully played by Gary Cooper, was persuaded to travel about the country as a revivalist preacher. He is shown bringing comfort and repentance to all sorts and condition of men by reason of the simplicity and directness with which he delivers the sermons provided for him. Little by little the Gospel he has been hired to preach takes hold of him by its intrinsic power until, himself a convert, he denounces himself as a fraud to a vast concourse of people whose gate-money has swelled the enormous profits his employers have already derived from the propagation of a truth they themselves have never believed in except as a dodge to gull the many-headed hydra thing. The meeting is held in an open air stadium and rain is falling heavily before the preacher appears. A thousand glistening umbrellas are photographed from

above—groups of spectators are shot from below the dripping ribs: the photography is superb. The riot which follows John Doe's shouted exposure of himself as a hired imposter is handled in a manner at once tragic, sardonic and admirably theatrical. John Doe is driven out into the rain, ruined, execrated and aware of a deeper failure than anyone in the crowd which has turned against him, begins to understand. Then follows one of the most moving and imaginative sequences I have ever seen filmed. The discredited evangelist hurries, alone, through the driving rain, and, out of the mists that swirl about him, peer the faces and stretch the hands of the people he has converted and to whom his downfall means the loss of the faith he has stirred in them.

Up to this point the whole film has been a triumph in construction and presentment: but at this point it breaks down: the medium is inadequate. There *is* a happy ending to such a tale; but because emotion, which the film can convey, is not enough, because the solution of the predicament stated is not to be found in any pictorial elaboration but requires analysis, argument, and the exercise of intellectual faculties to support and clear the way, the end of the journey could only properly be handled by a novelist whose knowledge and insight were sufficient to enable him to follow the invisible adventure of the spirit. So—since every film must to-day be framed in obedience to the tyranny of the box-office—John Doe, who has climbed to the topmost balcony of a sky-scraper intending to hurl himself down on the city in which he has been a deceiver yet true, is saved from suicide by the intervention of a passionate blonde who loves him with earthly fervour.

The film was a failure with the public in spite of great scenic display and magnificent photography. The ordinary film-going crowd was bewildered by its theme; the individuals who recognized the beauty and sincerity of its fable were dismayed by the artificial convention of its close. Remorse leading to martyrdom, after repentance, is a secret process—it cannot be shown in pictures.

It is for this reason that the greatest modern novels are unsuitable for translation into terms of the screen. You have only to consider Aldous Huxley's *Time Must Have a Stop* to see that any attempt to film it would result in a hideous satire on the, now mercifully old fashioned, theme of the hedonistic atheism of the 1920's, and that the significant core of the book which relates the downward progress of a soul after death would have to remain untouched. Try to construct a scenario out of any one of Virginia Woolf's novels and see how meaningless the sequence would be. Even *Brideshead Revisited*, with all its detail of English country houses and African monastery, and its glittering array of characters

would fade; in the most glorious technicolour rendering, because the implications of the tale lie outside time and beyond material existence. The screen cannot record imperishable values: it can indicate courage and suffering, because these arise from physical causes and are shown by action; but it cannot photograph either the mind or the soul. These must always remain the novelist's province.

When I look back on all the films I have seen during the last thirty years I am not at all sure that the greatest of them is not the first—that extraordinary record of Robert Falcon Scott's Antarctic Expedition, with its pageant of frozen seas and its comedy of penguin life, leading up to that last dim, heroic vision of four men trudging through the mist towards a goal at which they were to arrive only to discover that rivals had reached it before them. Delight, admiration, wonder and sorrow have never been raised to a higher pitch in the spectator: not even by the marvellous documentaries of the March of Time records, not even by the unrelenting accusation of the Russian war films; not even by our own War Office miracle, *Desert Victory*. All that has increased is the range of the camera's power to reproduce action, and the new realism provided by the sound track. The drama of the human mind reacting to great tests has still, as it was then, to be left entirely to the imagination of the watcher, has, on the whole and except in brief accidental flashes, to be omitted altogether. We should not have known the significance of that last Antarctic shot if we had not already learnt, from the written word of Captain Scott's published diary, how Captain Oates went out into the storm.

It is possible, if civilization ever should rise to the degree at which the whole public will reject the aphrodisiac vulgarity and din now swamping the movies, that the cinematograph apparatus will no longer be used to convey fiction, whether invented for the screen or adapted, and always reduced, in matter and significance, from novels, but will confine itself to the vast fields of documentary record and the observation of physical phenomena. Birds, insects, flowers, chemical processes, secrets of mineral growth have already yielded beauty and entertainment through the camera, but no advance in technical achievement will ever enable it to conduct an argument or to follow the quest of a soul. And this is why I hope that you, dear Douglas, when you come back to all the opportunities life has to offer, you will, if fiction seems to be the medium in which you decide to work, prefer to write novels rather than to add to the already enormous bulk of celluloid make-believe.

Yours ever,
NAOMI ROYDE SMITH.