

Making Films For Children*

An expert writes on the problem of motion picture content and child psychology as England sees it.

MARY FIELD, Director
Children's Film Department
Gaumont-British, London

ONE of the most important things to remember when you are making films for children is that children make a very critical audience. Films are a part of the culture into which they are born. They accept films as an integral part of life just as they accept aeroplanes, telephones and the radio. In many parts of the world, of course, films are almost the only form of public entertainment, so they take the place of the theatre and the concert hall. It is clear then that films form the chief contact which many millions of people have with the Arts. So we cannot afford to neglect the film in relation to the child.

For many years teachers and welfare workers have felt that children should not attend adult films which are not suited to them. But special exhibitions of adult films that seemed harmless for children never proved a sustained success. The reason was simple. The films were advertised as being good for children, so naturally enough, the children preferred to stay away.

Just before the war, in England, the film industry set to work to remove children from adult audiences. With a sound sense of psychology, two of the big circuits founded "children's cinema clubs." *You could attend the Saturday morning club meetings only if you were a Club member!* Non-members were left outside. As a result membership filled the English cinemas to capacity and attendance was regular. Now over four hundred thousand children attend cinema Club meetings every Saturday morning.

These Clubs are non-profit making. The members enjoy other activities beside film-going. There are football teams and cricket teams, swimming clubs, orchestras, concert parties, stamp clubs, model-making clubs, boating clubs, dramatic societies, even bands, all attached to the Clubs. This movement developed all over Britain in spite of war conditions and the blitzing of big towns. Membership is limited to children from the ages of seven to fourteen. The Clubs are playing an important part in their lives, since very few other club facilities are provided for children under the age of fourteen. But the problem for the organizers was, and is, what films to put on.

There are very few present-day films suitable for child audiences, and relatively few that are harmless. But most films, made for grown-ups, are definitely unsuitable, if not positively harmful for children. So about a year ago, Mr. J. Arthur Rank, the Chairman of both the Odeon and Gaumont Circuits—the pioneers of the Club movement—decided that special entertainment films must be made for children. He set up a Children's Film Department entrusted with this production. So we began making the first entertainment films to be produced entirely for children. We experimented with two short story films, a cartoon, a nature

film, and a topical film that is coming out once a month and is called "Our Club Magazine." It was a bad time to start as most of the film technicians were in the services and the war had produced a great shortage of film stock and studios. Still we thought it better to make some pictures and get them into the Children's Club entertainments so that we could learn by "trial and error" what the children's taste in films really is, and we have certainly learnt a lot.

One pleasure the children have been starved of in the cinema is the pleasure of being able to identify themselves with the actors on the screen. That is what adults enjoy doing so much at the pictures, but children had seen no children in the films, except an occasional child star whose environment was foreign and who was not in the least like themselves and their companions. We have found that they take the greatest pleasure in watching stories of very ordinary children in very ordinary British scenes. Between the ages of 7 and 14 we find children are realists in their filmgoing. They do not want to see heroes and heroines in very beautiful homes or very modern schools but in the kind of kitchens and classrooms that they are used to themselves. Nor do they like the kind of child actor that is attractive to adults. They like the ordinary, plain, rather pudding faced little boys and girls, and too glamorous a child in a film is apt to be branded as a "show off."

Once they have identified themselves with the characters in a film, the members of a child audience are extremely curious and want to see everything that is going on on the screen. This means that they want many more close-ups in their films than grown-up audiences do. They want to see what coin is offered as a reward; they want to know what is in a handbag or what is written in a letter; and if the story is set in a school sports meeting they want to see all the sports and not only an impression of the whole. They are also extremely logical and follow the story very critically ready to find fault with any mistake in time or sequence. If a picture does not seem to them to be really logical they tend to dismiss it, their greatest term of contempt for an ill directed story being "This is a silly film." This logical criticism applies not only to pictures with living actors but to cartoons and to nature pictures. The children are, however, exceedingly sensitive to beauty and I've heard a whole audience break into spontaneous applause. It was an exquisite scene of surf-riding where camera and actor combined to produce an effect of perfect rhythm in motion.

On the whole, child audiences go to look and not to listen. This means that in making films for them, the plot must be worked out by action and not by dialogue. Children will however listen very attentively to dialogue which is really essential to the development of the story and they remember the names of places

*An address broadcast by the British Broadcasting Corporation.



Courtesy Bell & Howell

Needlework Class for Girls

(From "Citizens of the Future," British film)

and people with surprising accuracy. They like good speech too. One little boy of eight, who was asked his opinion of a nature film, to which the commentary was written in rhymed couplets, was stimulated by the rhythm of the commentary to write his reply in very much better verse.

One thing we have learned very clearly from observing children's reactions and studying their written criticisms is to pay little or no attention to adult criticism of films made for children. It is the criticism of the children that matters and they like their stories constructed somewhat differently from those which suit grown-up taste. Children like their stories to be moral. They like black to be black and white to be white, and they demand that good shall triumph and that the bad boy or girl shall be punished. Nor is it sufficient to intimate that the evil-doers will get their deserts. The children want to see what is coming to the criminals and to judge for themselves whether the punishment is suitable and sufficient. They have no objection to moralising that makes grown-up critics wriggle in their seats, and they will cheer a chase across a town to restore a lost purse with the same enthusiasm as they would cheer the Sheriff riding down a horse-thief.

In all their pictures, however, children do like action and suspense. We must remember that the children already have had their taste formed by the ordinary grown-up pictures, and being as conservative in their film-going as they are in most other things, they would not appreciate a sudden radical change in their films. So we are prepared to take a very long term policy. Gradually we hope to improve the content of the films, while keeping to the present accepted form. Then in about five years when our present audience will have grown away from us we shall hope to introduce more far reaching changes. Ultimately we feel that children's entertainment films should provide adventure, fantasy, well-camouflaged information, and an opportunity of taking part in the screen entertainment. But above all, the films provided for children should be first class pieces of film craftsmanship. Thus, we shall be training intelligent adult film audiences before whom the film industry might put its best and most intelligent products.

Most people are interested to know who selects the stories for these films. The responsibility of selecting entertainment for so large a proportion of British children is too great to rest upon one group. There exists, therefore, an Advisory Council on Children's Entertainment Films. On this sit representatives of government departments and of all the National organizations that are interested in the leisure time of children. This Council has been kept small enough to be really active and practical. It advises on stories and the treatment of action and views and approves the films when they are completed.

One delicate point put up to the Advisory Council was whether a child character in a film should be rewarded for returning lost property or not. On the one hand it was important to show that one does good with no hope of reward, but on the other hand it was equally important to show that one should be generous to those who help you. This was an exceedingly delicate point of ethics and the responsibility of settling it lay on the Council. I wonder if you'd agree with their decision. They decided on a reward.

After our initial experimental films we made two serial stories as the children are particularly fond of



Courtesy Bell & Howell

Nest and eggs of the Tawny Owl

(From the G. B. Instructional film, "The Tawny Owl")

serials. One, made in Britain, is called *The Mystery of Smugglers' Cove*, while a very thrilling serial dealing with the capture of horse thieves by a group of children is called *Bush Christmas* and was produced in Australia. A series of children's travel films are in hand and special attention is being paid to the Dominions. It is hoped that some very interesting pictures of Australasia will be taken in the very near future.

Two children's feature films were made, one in Canada and one in this country. The British produced one is particularly interesting. It is called *The Little Ballerina* and deals with the life of London's stage children. We are hoping by means of this picture to introduce children to the ballet as a living and exciting art. If this proves successful we shall be able to go ahead, and by putting our stories into the right settings, we shall be able to arouse the children's interest in other great arts such as music, painting, sculpture and drama.

We are always being asked whether we are making

screen versions of the great children's classics. We are certainly hoping to do so if the stories lend themselves to film treatment, but we must remember that good films tell their stories in action, while many good books rely on telling their stories in words or by conversation and, therefore, do not make good screen material.

The films and the film clubs are already spreading

their influence outside Great Britain. The first Associate Club opened at Toronto last summer and more Clubs along these lines will be opening in the Dominions very soon. We have every reason to hope that in the future our children's entertainment films will serve as a link to join the children of the whole world in friendship.

The Motion Picture in World Peace

(Concluded from October Issue)

E. F. IMLE, Principal
Ascarate School, El Paso, Texas

ALTHOUGH we have won the war and are now striving to make that victory secure, if we do nothing about properly supervising the education of conquered and reoccupied countries there is nothing to keep any country from indoctrinating its young people anew with the idea of war and conquest. If even one nation is permitted to pursue such a policy, no other nation can safely or effectively teach peace and cooperation in its schools. Why cannot there be set up some sort of United Nations Educational Council whose duties it will be to organize and supervise on an international scale the education of all countries in general and of the conquered and reoccupied countries in particular? One authority says:⁵ "Education can be turned into a powerful weapon for peace. Two or three generations of the entire youth of the world educated with the belief that international differences can and should be settled by peaceful means only, would do much to break down the prejudices of national hate and distrust. The ideals and methods of peace could become so strong and so well understood that notions of conquest and war would be nipped in the bud. Persons advocating such notions would be treated, not as worthy leaders, but as criminals against mankind."

Educating for peace has been tried before but only on a national scale and only half-heartedly at that. But today we have a new tool, the film, which if used wisely can "span geographic frontiers . . . and crumble the barriers between people of different educations and different economic backgrounds",⁶ and between different racial and national groups. It will be difficult to convince people of the importance and need of controlling education of all countries in this respect. However, there is one bright hope; and that is that such a proposal will be a part of the peace treaty while the winning nations are willing to accept it because they cannot do otherwise.

To use the film effectively in education for international peace there must be an expertly formulated plan. The very important UNESCO conference in Washington last summer was reported in detail by Dr. Dugan in the September issue (page 386) of *EDUCATIONAL SCREEN*.

That meeting was concerned chiefly with desirable objectives and general services to be attained, and less with concrete organization and method for achieving world distribution of materials produced for the great end in view. There are undoubtedly many plans that will work, some better than others. I should like to suggest a plan modeled in part on the Texas War Film Program which was set up in that state in 1942-43.

The program used films put out by the Office of War Information and the Co-ordinator of Inter-American Affairs. It was in charge of a State War Film Coordinator who was an official in the State Department of Education. The state was divided into twenty districts, each with a District War Film Coordinator in charge. In each district prints of each film program were deposited with the district co-ordinator. He was given a list of all schools and organizations in his area that had 16mm. projectors, and it was his duty to schedule the film programs to the various places as demanded. In each district there were a number of Local War Film Coordinators whose duty it was to receive the films from the district coordinator and to see that they were given the greatest possible number of showings. The local co-ordinator was required to make regular reports to the CIAA, the OWI, and the District Coordinator, showing the size and character of the audiences seeing each film and making his comments. The data thus provided served to guide the further development of the program. There was no attempt on the part of the government to finance this program. It was a cooperative affair, the Federal Government furnishing the films free of charge, the District and Local Coordinators donating their services, and the schools and organizations paying the cost of transporting the programs they used. Certain administrative costs, which amounted to very little, were borne by the State Department of Education.⁷

On a world scale I would propose, as an integral part of the United Nations, an *International Movie Commission*, to have charge of administering the film educational program in all nations of the world. In each nation there shall be a *National Movie Commission* to coordinate the film educational program on

⁵Allen W. Beach, "Education in a World Peace Program," *School and Society*, Vol. 57 (Mar. 13, 1943), p. 298.

⁶Walter Spearman, *The Film Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow*, 1941, p. 19.

⁷John W. Gunstream, "Texas War Film Program," *The Educational Screen*, Vol. 22 (Jan., 1943), pp. 6-8.