

The Museum of Modern Art

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65

FILM NOTES edited by Eileen Bowser. 128 pages; one cover illustration; wire-o bound \$5.00. Published and distributed by The Museum of Modern Art

The more we hear about "now" films, the clearer it becomes that the motion picture has a past. This past, the subject of Film Notes, just published by The Museum of Modern Art, is responsible for film being the most challenging medium of our time. The book includes notes on American film from "The Execution of Mary Queen of Scots" (1895) to "The Gunfighter" (1950).

Pioneering in the fields of both film education and preservation, the Museum, in the mid-thirties, not only began to present to the public classic films from its newly established archives, but it also published serious essays on the history-making films. Those film notes, assembled in printed bulletins in 1935 and again in 1949, became collectors' items. They have now been reissued. Contributors to the book, revised and edited by Eileen Bowser, Associate Curator in charge of the Museum's archives, include the late Iris Barry, founder of the Museum's Film Library; the late Richard Griffith, former Film Curator; Arthur Knight, presently critic of the Saturday Review and professor of film; Gary Carey, former Curatorial Assistant in the Department of Film; and Alistair Cooke, the writer, essayist, political commentator, and erstwhile film critic; and Mrs. Bowser.

Film Notes, covers films of the 1890s, an example of which is Edison's Kinetoscope movie "Chinese Laundry"; five films by Edwin S. Porter of "The Great Train Robbery" fame; the Biograph films of D. W. Griffith, made between 1908 and 1913, among them "A Corner in Wheat"; several Mack Sennett films such as "Mabel's Dramatic Career," introducing Mabel Normand, later Charlie Chaplin's heroine; Chaplin's Keystone and Essanay films; two Bronco Billy westerns; the films of Thomas Ince; and post World War I and World War II fictional films.

The present volume, while useful for teachers and students, is also intended for a wider audience, according to Mrs. Bowser, who is alluding to those film-minded

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people curious about past cinematic developments. Viewpoints in Film Notes, Mrs. Bowser describes, are "tentative" because of changing taste and personal opinions that are expressed. In the words of Iris Barry, it is hoped that the book will serve "as a guide and stimulant" to today's growing number of film scholars.

Here are some of the facts of interest to scholars, film buffs, and just film-goers: contrary to popular belief, there is no standard speed for showing silent films; the Black Maria was the earliest known structure built as a motion picture studio; Thomas Edison conceived of the Kinetoscope as an accompaniment to his phonograph, and efforts to project motion pictures on a screen can largely be traced to William Kennedy Laurie Dickson, one of the many unfamiliar names in the path of this socio-cultural phenomenon; as early as 1895 a picture titled "The Execution of Mary Queen of Scots" contained the first stop-motion photography; and an example of early *cinéma vérité* may be found in "New York Street Scenes," made on location circa 1896.

Annotated with a bibliography and index to directors, Film Notes contains these and many more historic points of interest, such as the fact that in 1897 Fatima, the dancer, was twice filmed at Coney Island, each time by competitive film companies, and the resulting films may be responsible for the early cry for censorship of the movies.

Referring to "The Dream of a Rarebit Fiend," a trick film of a dream fantasy, Mrs. Bowser remarks, "The exuberant inventiveness of the early filmmakers provided a rich store from which masters of comedy such as Mack Sennett would draw the elements of a surrealistic world and playfully transform reality itself."

A new era in American film began with D. W. Griffith, who directed nearly 500 one-reel shorts in a period of five years. In "A Corner in Wheat," based on a contemporary event in 1909, the director, according to Iris Barry, "tried to make his characters resemble persons in real life and to reveal them intimately." He experimented with lighting effects, boldly manipulated his material, abandoned straight narrative and

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theatrical style (despite his stage background), ruthlessly cut short the action, joined brief unrelated scenes together, inserted cut backs and close shots, used space and time in a manner unique to film.

Miss Barry regarded as "a masterpiece" a fourteen-minute film Griffith made in 1912 called "The Musketeers of Pig Alley," with Lillian Gish. It was, she believed, the forerunner of the social-problem films, the gangster film, and the documentary. This film, lesser known by far than the epics "The Birth of a Nation" and "Intolerance," is one of many obscure but important early works to be included in Film Notes.

Review copies and stills available from Elizabeth Shaw, Director, and Lillian Gerard, Film Coordinator, Department of Public Information, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53rd Street, New York, New York 10019. Telephone (212) 956-7296 (7501).