

Chapter XI

THE ENLISTING OF INTEREST

BUT the human mind is not a film which registers once and for all each impression that comes through its shutters and lenses. The human mind is endlessly and persistently creative. The pictures fade or combine, are sharpened here, condensed there, as we make them more completely our own. They do not lie inert upon the surface of the mind, but are reworked by the poetic faculty into a personal expression of ourselves. We distribute the emphasis and participate in the action.

In order to do this we tend to personalize quantities, and to dramatize relations. As some sort of allegory, except in acutely sophisticated minds, the affairs of the world are represented. Social Movements, Economic Forces, National Interests, Public Opinion are treated as persons, or persons like the Pope, the President, Lenin, Morgan or the King become ideas and institutions. The deepest of all the stereotypes is the human stereotype which imputes human nature to inanimate or collective things.

The bewildering variety of our impressions, even after they have been censored in all kinds of ways, tends to force us to adopt the greater economy of the allegory. So great is the multitude of things that we cannot keep them vividly in mind. Usually, then, we name them, and let the name stand for the whole impression. But a name is porous. Old meanings slip out and new ones slip in, and the attempt to retain the full meaning of the name is almost as fatiguing as trying to recall the original impressions. Yet names are a poor currency for thought. They are too empty, too abstract, too inhuman. And so we begin to see the name through some personal stereotype, to read into it, finally to see in it the incarnation of some human quality.

Yet human qualities are themselves vague and fluctuating. They are best remembered by a physical sign. And therefore, the human qualities we tend to ascribe to the names of our impressions, themselves tend to be visualized in physical metaphors. The people of England, the history of England, condense into England, and England becomes John Bull, who is jovial and fat, not too clever, but well able to take care of himself. The migration of a people may appear to some as the meandering of a river, and to others like a devastating flood. The courage people display may be objectified as a rock; their purpose as a road, their doubts as forks of the road, their difficulties as ruts and rocks, their progress as a fertile valley. If they mobilize their dread-naughts they unsheath a sword. If their army surrenders they are thrown to earth. If they are oppressed they are on the rack or under the harrow.

When public affairs are popularized in speeches, headlines, plays, moving pictures, cartoons, novels, statues or paintings, their transformation into a human interest requires first abstraction from the original, and then animation of what has been abstracted. We cannot be much interested in, or much moved by, the things we do not see. Of public affairs each of us sees very little, and therefore, they remain dull and unappetizing, until somebody, with the makings of an artist, has translated them into a moving picture. Thus the abstraction, imposed upon our knowledge of reality by all the limitations of our access and of our prejudices, is compensated. Not being omnipresent and omniscient we cannot see much of what we have to think and talk about. Being flesh and blood we will not feed on words and names and gray theory. Being artists of a sort we paint pictures, stage dramas and draw cartoons out of the abstractions.

Or, if possible, we find gifted men who can visualize for us. For people are not all

endowed to the same degree with the pictorial faculty. Yet one may, I imagine, assert with Bergson that the practical intelligence is most closely adapted to spatial qualities. [1](#) A "clear" thinker is almost always a good visualizer. But for that same reason, because he is "cinematographic," he is often by that much external and insensitive. For the people who have intuition, which is probably another name for musical or muscular perception, often appreciate the quality of an event and the inwardness of an act far better than the visualizer. They have more understanding when the crucial element is a desire that is never crudely overt, and appears on the surface only in a veiled gesture, or in a rhythm of speech. Visualization may catch the stimulus and the result. But the intermediate and internal is often as badly caricatured by a visualizer, as is the intention of the composer by an enormous soprano in the sweet maiden's part.

Nevertheless, though they have often a peculiar justice, intuitions remain highly private and largely incommunicable. But social intercourse depends on communication, and while a person can often steer his own life with the utmost grace by virtue of his intuitions, he usually has great difficulty in making them real to others. When he talks about them they sound like a sheaf of mist. For while intuition does give a fairer perception of human feeling, the reason with its spatial and tactile prejudice can do little with that perception. Therefore, where action depends on whether a number of people are of one mind, it is probably true that in the first instance no idea is lucid for practical decision until it has visual or tactile value. But it is also true, that no visual idea is significant to us until it has enveloped some stress of our own personality. Until it releases or resists, depresses or enhances, some craving of our own, it remains one of the objects which do not matter.

Pictures have always been the surest way of conveying an idea, and next in order, words that call up pictures in memory. But the idea conveyed is not fully our own until we have identified ourselves with some aspect of the picture. The identification, or what Vernon Lee has called empathy, [2](#) may be almost infinitely subtle and symbolic. The mimicry may be performed without our being aware of it, and sometimes in a way that would horrify those sections of our personality which support our self-respect. In sophisticated people the participation may not be in the fate of the hero, but in the fate of the whole idea to which both hero and villain are essential. But these are refinements.

In popular representation the handles for identification are almost always marked. You know who the hero is at once. And no work promises to be easily popular where the marking is not definite and the choice clear. [3](#) But that is not enough. The audience must have something to do, and the contemplation of the true, the good and the beautiful is not something to do. In order not to sit inertly in the presence of the picture, and this applies as much to newspaper stories as to fiction and the cinema, the audience must be exercised by the image. Now there are two forms of exercise which far transcend all others, both as to ease with which they are aroused, and eagerness with which stimuli for them are sought. They are sexual passion and fighting, and the two have so many associations with each other, blend into each other so intimately, that a fight about sex outranks every other theme in the breadth of its appeal. There is none so engrossing or so careless of all distinctions of culture and frontiers.

The sexual motif figures hardly at all in American political imagery. Except in certain minor ecstasies of war, in an occasional scandal, or in phases of the racial conflict with Negroes or Asiatics, to speak of it at all would seem far-fetched. Only in moving pictures, novels, and some magazine fiction are industrial relations, business competition, politics, and diplomacy tangled up with the girl and the other woman. But the fighting motif appears at every turn. Politics is interesting when there is a fight, or as we say, an issue. And in order to make politics popular,

issues have to be found, even when in truth and justice, there are none, --none, in the sense that the differences of judgment, or principle, or fact, do not call for the enlistment of pugnacity. [4](#)

But where pugnacity is not enlisted, those of us who are not directly involved find it hard to keep up our interest. For those who are involved the absorption may be real enough to hold them even when no issue is involved. They may be exercised by sheer joy in activity, or by subtle rivalry or invention. But for those to whom the whole problem is external and distant, these other faculties do not easily come into play. In order that the faint image of the affair shall mean something to them, they must be allowed to exercise the love of struggle, suspense, and victory.

Miss Patterson [5](#) insists that "suspense... constitutes the difference between the masterpieces in the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the pictures at the Rivoli or the Rialto Theatres." Had she made it clear that the masterpieces lack either an easy mode of identification or a theme popular for this generation, she would be wholly right in saying that this "explains why the people straggle into the Metropolitan by twos and threes and struggle into the Rialto and Rivoli by hundreds. The twos and threes look at a picture in the Art Museum for less than ten minutes--unless they chance to be art students, critics, or connoisseurs. The hundreds in the Rivoli or the Rialto look at the picture for more than an hour. As far as beauty is concerned there can be no comparison of the merits of the two pictures. Yet the motion picture draws more people and holds them at attention longer than do the masterpieces, not through any intrinsic merit of its own, but because it depicts unfolding events, the outcome of which the audience is breathlessly waiting. It possesses the element of struggle, which never fails to arouse suspense."

In order then that the distant situation shall not be a gray flicker on the edge of attention, it should be capable of translation into pictures in which the opportunity for identification is recognizable. Unless that happens it will interest only a few for a little while. It will belong to the sights seen but not felt, to the sensations that beat on our sense organs, and are not acknowledged. We have to take sides. We have to be able to take sides. In the recesses of our being we must step out of the audience on to the stage, and wrestle as the hero for the victory of good over evil. We must breathe into the allegory the breath of our life.

And so, in spite of the critics, a verdict is rendered in the old controversy about realism and romanticism. Our popular taste is to have the drama originate in a setting realistic enough to make identification plausible and to have it terminate in a setting romantic enough to be desirable, but not so romantic as to be inconceivable. In between the beginning and the end the canons are liberal, but the true beginning and the happy ending are landmarks. The moving picture audience rejects fantasy logically developed, because in pure fantasy there is no familiar foothold in the age of machines. It rejects realism relentlessly pursued because it does not enjoy defeat in a struggle that has become its own.

What will be accepted as true, as realistic, as good, as evil, as desirable, is not eternally fixed. These are fixed by stereotypes, acquired from earlier experiences and carried over into judgment of later ones. And, therefore, if the financial investment in each film and in popular magazines were not so exorbitant as to require instant and widespread popularity, men of spirit and imagination would be able to use the screen and the periodical, as one might dream of their being used, to enlarge and to refine, to verify and criticize the repertory of images with which our imaginations work. But, given the present costs, the men who make moving pictures, like the church and the court painters of other ages, must adhere to the stereotypes that they find, or pay the price of frustrating expectation. The stereotypes can be altered, but not in time to guarantee success when the film is released six months from now.

The men who do alter the stereotypes, the pioneering artists and critics, are naturally depressed and angered at managers and editors who protect their investments. They are risking everything, then why not the others? That is not quite fair, for in their righteous fury they have forgotten their own rewards, which are beyond any that their employers can hope to feel. They could not, and would not if they could, change places. And they have forgotten another thing in the unceasing war with Philistia. They have forgotten that they are measuring their own success by standards that artists and wise men of the past would never have dreamed of invoking. They are asking for circulations and audiences that were never considered by any artist until the last few generations. And when they do not get them, they are disappointed.

Those who catch on, like Sinclair Lewis in "Main Street," are men who have succeeded in projecting definitely what great numbers of other people were obscurely trying to say inside their heads. "You have said it for me." They establish a new form which is then endlessly copied until it, too, becomes a stereotype of perception. The next pioneer finds it difficult to make the public see Main Street any other way. And he, like the forerunners of Sinclair Lewis, has a quarrel with the public.

This quarrel is due not only to the conflict of stereotypes, but to the pioneering artist's reverence for his material. Whatever the plane he chooses, on that plane he remains. If he is dealing with the inwardness of an event he follows it to its conclusion regardless of the pain it causes. He will not tag his fantasy to help anyone, or cry peace where there is no peace. There is his America. But big audiences have no stomach for such severity. They are more interested in themselves than in anything else in the world. The selves in which they are interested are the selves that have been revealed by schools and by tradition. They insist that a work of art shall be a vehicle with a step where they can climb aboard, and that they shall ride, not according to the contours of the country, but to a land where for an hour there are no clocks to punch and no dishes to wash. To satisfy these demands there exists an intermediate class of artists who are able and willing to confuse the planes, to piece together a realistic-romantic compound out of the inventions of greater men, and, as Miss Patterson advises, give "what real life so rarely does—the triumphant resolution of a set of difficulties; the anguish of virtue and the triumph of sin... changed to the glorifications of virtue and the eternal punishment of its enemy." [6](#)

The ideologies of politics obey these rules. The foothold of realism is always there. The picture of some real evil, such as the German threat or class conflict, is recognizable in the argument. There is a description of some aspect of the world which is convincing because it agrees with familiar ideas. But as the ideology deals with an unseen future, as well as with a tangible present, it soon crosses imperceptibly the frontier of verification. In describing the present you are more or less tied down to common experience. In describing what nobody has experienced you are bound to let go. You stand at Armageddon, more or less, but you battle for the Lord, perhaps... A true beginning, true according to the standards prevailing, and a happy ending. Every Marxist is hard as nails about the brutalities of the present, and mostly sunshine about the day after the dictatorship. So were the war propagandists: there was not a bestial quality in human nature they did not find everywhere east of the Rhine, or west of it if they were Germans. The bestiality was there all right. But after the victory, eternal peace. Plenty of this is quite cynically deliberate. For the skilful propagandist knows that while you must start with a plausible analysis, you must not keep on analyzing, because the tedium of real political accomplishment will soon destroy interest. So the propagandist exhausts the interest in reality by a tolerably plausible beginning, and then stokes up energy for a long voyage by brandishing a passport to heaven.

The formula works when the public fiction enmeshes itself with a private urgency. But once enmeshed, in the heat of battle, the original self and the original stereotype which effected the junction may be wholly lost to sight.

1 *Creative Evolution*, Chs. III, IV. [Back to 1](#)

2 *Beauty and Ugliness*. [Back to 2](#)

3 A fact which bears heavily on the character of news. *Cf.* Part VII. [Back to 3](#)

4 *Cf.* Frances Taylor Patterson, *Cinema Craftsmanship*, pp. 31-32. "III. If the plot lacks suspense: 1. Add an antagonist, 2. Add an obstacle, 3. Add a problem, 4. Emphasize one of the questions in the minds of the spectator. . . ." [Back to 4](#)

5 *Op. cit.*, pp. 6-7. [Back to 5](#)

6 *Op. cit.*, p. 46. "The hero and heroine must in general possess youth, beauty, goodness, exalted self-sacrifice, and unalterable constancy." [Back to 6](#)

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