



OUR DAILY BREAD

By RUDOLF ARNHEIM

How are we to explain that after having seen King Vidor's new film, *Our Daily Bread*, we feel happy, free and filled with a sense of purification, while we are accustomed, as a rule, to leave the cinema with our minds disturbed, in bad humour with ourselves, and with almost with the feeling that comes after an excess? There is neither great art nor profound wisdom in King Vidor, but he does give us the rare chance of hearing and seeing the thoughts and sentiments of a simple honest good man expressed in natural and uncomplicated fashion.

The motion picture has become the oppor-

tunity, the field of action for the lie. We are supposed to be watching men, but what is exhibited to us is something turned out by a kind of sweetmeat factory, a product with a disgusting, changeless, sweetish taste. We are supposed to be shown dramas of truth, sentiment and passion, and all we see is the experts' recipe for pleasing the public taste. We are offered an intoxicating poison distilled from misery, crime and cruelty. There is always a feigned interest in the problems of the day in these films, a kind of false pity for our social woes; there is even sometimes a sort of revolutionary spirit, but all these

effects are produced and projected solely from the box-office angle. The director assumes an inspired attitude, but he is really working out his expenses and probable returns.

The film director mixes up strange compounds, and believes he is creating something artistic. The actor shows off his chest muscles, his profile; his admirable legs, and calls this « expression ». We might almost say that the cinemas have become houses of ill fame, immoral certainly in quite a different sense from that in which the word is understood in the society of those ladies of our time who demand that the cinema should be boycotted. Women of this type think that morality means leaving certain subjects in a sepulchral silence.

The cinema is immoral in another sense because love there is really nothing but a low speculation, while all our natural instincts which create life are transformed into a series of artificial sensations and delights devoid of sense or purpose.

In a setting like this, the work of an honest man such as King Vidor seems like a revelation and a liberation. His films are a clear reflection of his thoughts and feelings which, again, are the thoughts and feelings of the man in the street of our times. If this has some disadvantages from the artistic and spiritual points of views, socially and morally it is useful and educational.

This last film of his is inspired by the headlines of our days as King Vidor states himself, and the fact is even truer that he imagines. What can be summed up of our days in a few huge capital letter headings — misery, inexactitude, iniquity — has been King Vidor's inspiration. He has not looked at the small print letterpress of the papers for his inspiration, in those pages where the naked simplicity and clarity of the titles is confused, twisted, made sophisticated and falsified. If we look at this picture as a piece of propaganda for a realistic policy

aimed at resolving the economic crisis, as a practical illustration of the slogan « Back to the Land! » then the film can very well be called primitive, superficial stale and o'd. It glides over problems and substitutes anecdotes for solutions. The greed of the land speculators is passed over with a cry of rage, with the menace of a few blows and the question of the capital necessary for carrying on the agricultural enterprise is mixed up with the price put upon a member of the colony. No, this film is no formula for a *realpolitik*. It is beautiful because it expresses the sentiment of men who return to the primordial facts of life with amazement, who find in the oldest and the newest things something of the miraculous. They work and live on next to nothing. They strive and win not unemployment and hunger, but the fruit of the fields, the produce of the land, which springs up as a kind of automatic





response to their struggles, through the law of nature.

Greater than the miracle of life for simple men who in a charming scene return thanks, kneeling on the earth, is the discovery that morality and justice are immanent in nature, and the revelation that comes to them that to the man that gives it shall be given. And when they threaten with their fists, this is primitive and at the same time revolutionary. When the fugitive goes to give himself up so as to help the colony's work with the money coming from the reward, we find ourselves facing a subtle paradox. It is, however, a paradox with a somewhat bitter taste for justice.

The foregoing would perhaps give the idea that we are dealing with a solemn and pathetic film along Russian lines. On the con-

trary it is rather an abstract kind of picture and not really tragic. It is really only to be understood if we consider it as a humorous picture. It is only the man of genius who can truly laugh, for he alone knows what is erring and wrong and lacking. If it true that intelligence and independence of spirit are the chief things required for the solution of our contemporary problems, it is also a fact that, without a sense of the comic, it is impossible to attain that wisdom we so much need.

We feel the genuine Anglo-Saxon humour in King Vidor. It is here rather than in some of the exotic Hollywood importations that the true America speaks, through its boisterous students, its cowboys and boxers, and its football matches between police and public demonstrators, the land where political disturbances are put down with the firemen's hose.

It is the country of Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton that we see, the land of Tom Mix and Douglas Fairbanks, where the cowboy Will Rogers is a radio philosopher, a country that smiles like Mark Twain and is as simple as Upton Sinclair. A land that is still too young for great tragedy. In Robert Flaherty, in Eisenstein, in Pudowkin, the struggle for life, the fight against need and suffering has a dramatic force. With Vidor, difficulties and obstacles are only a nuisance. What is grandeur in the one case becomes a kind of sport in the other. What a powerful use of symbolism there is in Flaherty when we see the men of Aran extracting the scanty earth from the crevices in the rocks. The young man of the Vidor film who digs the hard soil is a haphazard youth benevolently looked down on by his wife. Even in the scenes where it would seem impossible to avoid a pathetic grandeur, Vidor maintains a sober, solid calm. When it is not only the horse which draws the plough, but groups of men, old Ford machines and motor-cycles, we feel emotion, but

at the same time, we are aware of the secret smile with which Vidor considers civilized man, whose superb inventions do not show up very grandly in the open fields. When the peasant throws his body against the water which overflows from the canal, and seeks to guide it towards the dried-up earth, we are inevitably reminded of the goal-keeper saving a goal. We may wonder who best deals with the tasks that modern life imposes on us: the youthful sportsman who carelessly and without heroics meets the difficulties and seeks to conquer them with ridicule, or the man who is borne down by the tragedy of existence and in his seriousness feels old and tired?

« See how awful life is » exclaims the art of Europe. And from afar this American film

answers with limpid voice: « Dear friends, why complicate so simple a matter? »

This film is the A. B. C. of good sense. It shows us that ten men can do more than one. It shows us collectivist organization, the land in common, money in common. It shows how the strong man who thrusts out the weak and cries « I am the boss here » must be punished. One man helps another. We see the mason struggling with the beams of a house and a carpenter in difficulties with his toil. The two of them join forces and help each other. This is a picture full of faith in the goodness of men.

In the most clear-cut manner, like an example illustrating a concept, mason and carpenter stand side by side. This is not realism or « verism »; it is a case of style. If the Rus-



sian film does not alter the substance of reality, but liberates a simpler and fuller form of action, the meaning of which — contrast and parallelism — appears only in the sub-division of the action into detailed scenes and episodes, Vidor on the contrary, builds up his film on the methods of the comic picture, a plot made up of accentuated and heightened situations and special gags. His film is shown out of doors in a setting of nature, but he does not allow us to become conscious of this. Vidor's sun does not shine; there are no murmurs of the wind in the corn he shows us; the water in his picture is without refreshment. His images are as abstract as Disney's line drawings, and possess even less style, since they do not attempt to obtain expression from the visual elements, but neglect them. Light is not called upon to create atmosphere, nor to make us feel the quality and various characters of the different objects and materials. The surroundings only lend an accidental frame to the action. The mounting piles scene on scene like men roughly heaping blocks one upon another. The story is divided into parts by simple periods of darkness. Vidor shows himself once again anything but an « interesting » *régisieur*. We are back in the pre-war tradition of film-producing, when in films of this type, as in those of Chaplin and Keaton, expression is obtained from the scenic effects rather than by astute camera work. It is in these cases the continuity rather than the mounting which relieves the actor from the trouble of acting. A good director is not he who makes his actors talk well, but rather he who puts them in circumstances which require little of them in the way of talking and declaiming. When the man and the woman come back to each other, we do not

see distraught eyes nor waving arms. She offers him a drink, and he looks at her for a second calmly, with the glass before his face.

Just as here the glass hides the face, so does Vidor always hide the manifestation of deep sentiments with a knowledge of his limitations. This is not only right, but it produces an effect of purity and sincerity, and offers at the same time an example of artistic parsimony which might well find imitators. Like Sternberg, and with Sternberg's courage, Vidor suppresses everything which he judges not to be indispensable. A fleeting glance of the young peasant is the only manifestation of his relation with the blond girl. A secondary character, important for the action only for the reason of his death, does not appear on the screen, either alive or dead. We only see for an instant through a little doorway the funeral passing. Anyone who still thinks that the continuity and the directors work can be separated will see here how the latter is already to be found in the continuity.

In every good film, the continuity and handling of the scenes are the work of one person. This film too is the expression of one man, of a young fellow with blue eyes, who utters his opinions, beating his fist on the table.

This is no intellectual or artistic masterpiece, but what may be called « daily bread for us all. We are liable to suffer from hunger in this sense, for it is only once or twice a year that we can enjoy pictures like this. Then we can gain the courage to support again the Catherines, the Cleopatras, the gangsters in evening dress, the hefty vamps, the tenors and the flappers.

How long will King Vidor be an exception instead of the general rule?