

BOOK REVIEW

The Film Index: A Bibliography, Vol. I, *The Film as Art*, Compiled by Workers of the Writers' Program of the Work Projects Administration in the City of New York. Sponsored by the Honorable Fiorello H. LaGuardia, Mayor of the City of New York, The Museum of Modern Art Film Library, and the H. W. Wilson Company, 1941.

Whatever faults may be found with the first volume of the Film Index are matters of little critical moment, for this bibliography of motion picture literature is the only thing of its kind in existence and is therefore indispensable to every movie worker. The literature of the film is at once so vast and so ephemeral that efforts to make exact research in the history or technic of the art-industry were in the past doomed to defeat and new writing about the motion picture usually perpetuated as many errors as facts. This situation was partly overcome when the Museum of Modern Art Film Library, founded in 1935, began to collect as much motion picture writing as it could find and to make it available to students. Now the second step toward clarification and organization has been taken with the publication of this intricately cross-indexed bibliography. Workers of the New York Writers' project of the W. P. A. spent approximately four years combing books, newspapers, and other periodicals for references to the film: the first fruit of their labor is this 723-page guide to writing on the artistic aspects of film. Two more volumes, "The Film as Industry" and "The Film in Society" are now in work, but the year of their publication has not yet been calculated.

In a volume called "The Film as Art," sections of greatest interest to members of the Society are those under "Technique," including "Surveys of Film Crafts," "Color," "Editing," "Photography," "Production Effects," "Sound." Readers who are motion picture engineers may find much of the material listed here familiar—the Society's JOURNAL is mentioned over and over—but to run through any of the sections is to get a general and impersonal view of the field discussed which corrects the individual expert's natural tendency toward lopsidedness. Incomplete the listings may sometimes be, but they never fail to astound even the veteran specialist with unheard-of writing by unheard-of people on subjects supposedly fully covered by standard writers. As for the remainder of the volume, it is as fascinating and various and full of human attractions—aside from scholarship—as the movies themselves. Even to read aimlessly through the listings, and the brief digests of books and magazine articles which accompany them, is to capture something of the excitement and fervor with which all sorts of people have written about this new, undisciplined, and lively art. Iris Barry's foreword suggests some of the pleasures which the volume supplies, as well as some curious conclusions about the motion picture and motion picture writing:

"It is rather surprising, actually, to observe how early publication on this new topic began: the pioneer W. K. L. Dickson, laboratory assistant to Edison, had a book out in 1859, the very year which is often regarded as the birthdate of the movies. . . . It is hardly news perhaps that the poet Vachel Lindsay was one of the

first to provide critical appreciation of motion pictures, or that Minnie Maddern Fiske was among those who earliest signaled the extraordinary talents of Charlie Chaplin. But it is interesting to discover that the art critic Thomas Craven reviewed Nazimova's *Salome* in 1923, that Joyce Kilmer wrote an obituary tribute to the comedian John Bunny and that Jack London as long ago as 1915 was hailing the motion picture as a means of universal education. . . . The bibliography quite properly aims at being comprehensive rather than selective, but it reveals some interesting facts, such as that Charlie Chaplin has been written about more than any other film personage, with D.W. Griffith close behind him, Mary Pickford and Sergei Eisenstein running third and fourth. Curiously enough, among the twenty-five films which have been most frequently discussed, no less than twelve are foreign ones, though these can have meant little to the general public even if they influenced or imitated Hollywood technique. But the more intellectual and persistent of writers on the film as art have, with few exceptions, obviously tended to write with greater passion and fecundity about exotic and tragic pictures than about domestic and cheerful ones—which suggests a considerable gap between such criticism and the common experience or taste."

As stated earlier, the book is indispensable to anyone who has consistent need to read about the film and its tributary arts and crafts. As for myself, I don't know how I managed to get along before it was published.

RICHARD GRIFFITH