

Terry Ramsaye-- from "A Million and One Nights"

"Most history is autopsy. This one is vivisection."

Terry Ramsaye's "A Million and One Nights," written in 1925, captures the early days of film and the popular sentiments and common held convictions of the day concerning the developing artistic medium. The piece features commentary on the rapid development and emergence of film, stating that "For the first time in the history of the world, an art has sprouted, grown up and blossomed in so brief a time that one person might stand by and see it happen."

Ramsaye discloses his belief that the motion picture is a "genuine art," defining *genuine* as "strictly popular." His central argument stems from the understanding that the motion picture, like all art forms, appeals to the basic human desires of sex and combat, and that the eye is the principle mechanism of understanding the art form and the art's intent. The motion picture is described as the "great common denominator" of the arts as a whole, as it appeals to childhood, adolescence, hopes and dreams.

Ramsaye's argument that all art is childish and adolescent, appealing to youth and the experience of youth in the human race is illustrated in his brief examples of classical history to the modern era. He discusses the process of cultivating art as constantly re-evaluating, through trial and error, the process of popular mediums.

Discussion of the Post-World War I condition is featured prominently in the reading selection. At the time the piece was written, America dominated the film market: of the 50,000 theatres in the world, 21,000 were located in the US. Between 1914-1925, American films represented 80% of the world market, helped by extend by the limitation of exportation of films during the war. Ramsaye discloses three consequences of the war: the rivalries between America and other countries in film distribution and exploitation overseas, the expansion of tastes in American-made films to appeal to international filmgoers, and the encouragement of foreign markets to create film empires of their own that would negatively affect the American monopoly.

Ramsaye discusses his perception concerning the role of race and ethnicity, citing that the Jewish population, referred to as "facile internationalists" acted as prime industry administrators, and creates a psychological link between the garment and motion picture industries. According to the author, the rise of the American motion picture market developed out of the "confusion of tongues and races in Babel centers of concentration for imported labor," namely Chicago, New York, Cincinnati, St. Louis and Milwaukee, where the ideals of opulence, opportunity, and optimism thrived.

The international market was becoming more and more of a threat to the American dominated motion picture industry at the end of 1924, largely due in part to Germany's "Kontingent" law, which forbade the importation of non- Germanic films following the First World War. The international market expanded from a mere 20% in 1914 of the economic market in the industry to nearly 40% in 1925, with France, England, Berlin, Italy and Russia opening their own film production companies.

The industry was experiencing other changes as well. Chain theater companies in the US had become increasingly more common, first initiated by Greek ownership of theaters, where nearly 10% of all theaters in the US were owned by those of Greek nationality, followed by the economic pursuits of Adolph Zukor and the Players-Lasky Corporation, which both owned theatres and a production company. When accused of forming a monopoly by the Federal Trade Commission in 1925, the group separated its interests, and the 200 theatres owned by the corporation were sold to Balaban and Katz of Chicago. The new company, renamed the Public Theatre Company, owned roughly 800 theatres.

The histories of several prominent executives of the age, including Sam Katz, owner of the Public Theatre Company, Sidney Kent and Marcus Loew, who controlled Metro Goldwyn- Mayer and William Fox, are chronicled, as well as corporate histories of Universal and Warner Brothers. These histories reflect the growing need to capitalize on a swiftly evolving emerging industry of motion picture production and distribution.

The narration, which at times feels disorganized, also follows the rise of film star Gloria Swanson. The strict history of the actor's evolution from unknown to star is a typical tale, but interesting insights into early film culture fandom are illustrated. The cultivation of back histories of stars by the fans, largely spread by gossip, are certainly evidence of a unique phenomenon that would become more complex in subsequent years.

The reading concludes with an argument that American theatre evolves from a "soil to nuts" system of a vertical trust. Despite the insular ideal of the motion picture industry, partnerships between apparently unrelated industries, such as the use of the Yellow Cab Company for the delivery of film materials became options to increase economic opportunity and industry diversity. While Ramsaye convincingly portrays the industry as under a centralized control system, individual creativity and management skills were of prime importance to the overall success of individual theatres. He further suggests that as theatres and production houses grow in size and economic dominance, the theatre must consider the growing demands of the audience and must strive toward constant improvement. The author is optimistic that the industry will not disappoint over time.

Ramsaye closes his work by creating and extending the metaphor between "A Thousand and One Nights" and the history film, illustrating parallels in romantic, poetic language. He concludes with the suggestion, once again, that film history is not exclusive; it is the history of the world.