

MILENA JESENSKÁ

Cinema

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Milena Jesenská (1896–1944) was a Czech journalist, translator, and writer who contributed articles and feuilletons to various newspapers and magazines in Prague, including the liberal daily *Tribuna*. In the following article, she distinguishes cinema from the theater and characterizes moviegoing as a form of refuge from the complexities

of modern life, and even a drug of forgetting. The same year this article appeared, Jesenská published a Czech translation of Franz Kafka's "The Stoker" and engaged in a passionate correspondence with the author.

I am always perplexed when I see the cinema being compared to the theater. Someone condemns or defends a performance, weighs one against the other, speaks of the artistry, or lack thereof, in the cinema. Many interesting things can be said about the cinema—for example, about its sexual effect upon the masses (more so than about its moral or aesthetic effect), its propagandistic function, or taste and decoration, in some instances also about its technical and, in many instances, its provocative side—but the insistence upon competition with theater strikes me as outright exaggerated, even superficial.

If such a competition exists, it remains insubstantial: we can refer to the cost of a ticket, to the length and variety of the programs, to the heated spaces, to the low and high cost of entertainment (which corresponds to the level of the audience), to milieu, to a hundred other superficial things. But to cite an internal and artistic competition would not be appropriate because whatever artistry does emerge from the limited range of possibilities afforded by the cinema, it has not even a single element in common with the theater. When we speak of art in the context of theater, we refer to the author, the drama, the language, the problem, the depth of the idea, its connection to life. If we speak about art in the cinema, we can speak of the technical achievement that may be exemplary—whether it be the photography, the director, the actors, or the subject matter—but always in relation to reproduction. In the theater we do not enjoy ourselves; in the theater we listen, compare, learn, and look. In the worst case, we are interested. In the cinema? That is it precisely: What do we do in the cinema?

I know people who sit every day from noon until night in coffeehouses. It is not as if they don't have a living room at home, that they don't have anything to eat, that they cannot cook, or find a quiet place. Nowadays all these excuses do not apply to the people I mean. Before the war, they sat in the coffeehouse (the difference being that they sat there longer because they were open longer), and they sit there after the war, too. I don't mean the loungers and idlers who are useless by any standard. Many coffeehouse patrons are excellent artists who give form to ideas and notions through their respective media on a daily basis. Many pursue their bourgeois labor and spend the rest of the day in the coffeehouse. That is not an unrespectable life; it is the search for a neutral milieu; the opportunity to forget—not to have to think about oneself; the need to exist as a private ego as little as possible—a relief from life.

Now yes! I know people who can go to the movies every day. It's not that they don't want to work or have nothing to do. Rather it is because it is a comfort to the soul to sit in the movies. Everything we see appears to be life. And still, such a powerful and such a comfortable difference. In the movies, it's about love and hate, good and evil, honesty and depravity. Here, a villain appears, rolls his eyes, clenches his fists. Everyone knows with certainty that this man will be captured in the end and that nothing bad will befall the innocent girl who is ardently in love with a poor young man. The poor young man is true to her and does well for himself. Isn't that nice? Nothing can happen to the girl; otherwise, it would not be ethical; otherwise, the film would not be approved by the censor. Here there are bad women in negligees who smoke, reclining on an ottoman, and good women who mend clothes, read books, play piano, or hug curly-haired children. We know with certainty that they are good and that it is entirely impossible to discover something bad in their souls; and about the evil ones, we know that they are evil and, therefore, that they have earned our contempt and absolutely no sympathy. We need not fear committing an injustice against them and can rest assured that they will be punished before we leave the cinema, and that the punishment will be just. Here heroic, honorable

men risk their lives for the beloved woman—they risk honor, possessions, health, existence. While the others, who simply want to possess a woman, approach her from behind and grab her shoulders in a devilish way. If they should be rejected, they bow their heads elegantly; if not, they sit “afterwards” in an easy chair. But in every case they smoke a cigarette out of the corner of their mouths, which looks very cynical. They have pajamas and black hair. We recognize them immediately and disdain them with utter loathing.

Really, how nice the world would be if it were so. How comfortable it would be if a person were either guaranteed good or evil, if the women were bad or noble, true or untrue, seducible or chaste, good-hearted or rotten! How lovely, how compassionate the world is in the movies, where simple dimensions appear in pure form that we never see, never comprehend, never fathom in life. In our world, people are simultaneously good and bad, true and untrue, reviled and proud. Every heart is complicated, every life is difficult and unresolved; luck is moody, independent of good or evil acts. Everything is a thousand times different from what we know. We cannot flee at the last minute out of the window of a high tower on a hundred-meter rope that we spun from our own shirt. We cannot, happily in the instances when we are good, or unhappily in those instances when we are bad, jump over the tops of moving trains or throw ourselves from bridges into the water. No villains immure our rightful inheritance in underground chambers and await our legacy, and the prostitutes whom we encounter are not demonic women nor are they women with tragic fates who stir our hearts with their confused lives. Our husbands betray us without being the scum of the human community, and our lovers are entirely ordinary officials, businessmen, ministers, and actors, not seductive and undependable rascals.

We puzzle over the meaning of our existence. And look, at the movies the puzzle is solved, and done so with all the falseness of our fantasies about life. How pleasant! How charming! How comfortable! How sweet it is to think for a time with the mind of the screen heroes, to take a break from the problems of one’s own life, and to see a clear, self-evident life made up of light-phantoms; to experience the great passion with the strong, unproblematic, uncomplicated hearts of figures that stride about in beautiful dress and makeup (even when there is nothing to eat), lit by the shimmer of fantastic scenery and accompanied by waltz melodies strummed by an orchestra.

Cinema is different than entertainment. We can compare cinema with a drinker’s alcohol, with an addict’s opium—it is something that allows forgetting, tickles pleasantly, and rocks one to sleep. Cinema is something that we cowards happily give ourselves in order to better endure life; it is something easier to bear, because in the face of our deformed lives, we are powerless.