

Was it only a noble flight of my historian's imagination? Hardly. For please note that he is nowise content with the above astonishing innuendo. Riding high in H. G. Wells's time machine, with lever at the reverse, he runs back twenty centuries and seeks to unearth facts. Lucretius, he says, is responsible for the dawn of the moving picture idea.

Amazing, is it not? A most monstrous indictment to tax anybody with and most of all the gentle Roman poet who, it will be remembered, smeared the bitter brim of philosophy's chalice with the ingratiating honey of sensuous poetry so that you and I, like little children taking their unpalatable medicine, might be persuaded to drink it. But then you will say: Lucretius was mad. So he was. And many will not scruple to hang the whole blame for starting the movies upon his madness, which has already been richly exploited by both commentators and later poets.

The madness of Lucretius was of such a peculiar sort that it deserves an advocate. For madness in an age of reason is an exalted thing. Consider how few possess it—that is, for any appreciable length of time. Most unhinged minds soon dash one's highest hopes to the ground. Either they temporize by taking refuge in a sanatorium or they go over to the enemy's camp altogether, and the world warms to them again, taking them back with open arms and showering them with their lost rights of citizenship, including the right of always voting wrong. Madness, like a taste for persimmons, is often a cultivated appetite or art. It is most to be prized (although the police stay unconvinced) when it is free and footloose. Once it is housebroken, so to speak, the joy of its usufruct is considerably diminished. It

LUCRETIVS AND THE MOTION PICTURE

By Pierre Loving

FROM the pages of a recent history of the movies, which I was listlessly examining in the library of a friend, there jumped out at me the startling news that T. Carus Lucretius, the Roman poet, had gone over into the movie camp. For a moment I could hardly believe my eyes. Why, I said, Lucretius has been dead these two thousand years. And even if he were not, what, pray, would he be doing in the movies? Here was something to give one pause, if not to shake one out of the complacency and kudos of the twentieth century.

Then I recalled some of the rumors that were rife in the motion picture studios, and my astonishment was a little mitigated. Homer, so ran one of them, chanted the sea thunder of his *Odyssey* for the screen; and another was that Virgil, thinking of upholstering his nest against old age, cast a potboiling eye upon future picturization. From this it will be seen that the movies, although a young art, feed and keep alive a body of folk lore that is curiously their own.

is said that Lucretius became mad after swallowing a love potion mixed by his jealous wife. Perhaps he welcomed his insanity. The theory is not untenable. Perhaps, after beholding in a vision the conquering grip of the movies on the imagination of millions of people from Greenland to Patagonia, from New York to Vladivostok, he lackadaisically gulped down the draft and forthwith feigned madness. Deliberately, I suspect, he wooed madness and, through madness, tranquillity and death.

The irony of it! Here was a lonely shepherd of the still, twilight fields of thought who only sought to follow in the footprints of his master, Epicurus. By reason of his theories he had drawn down upon himself the harsh sobriquet of infidel, which was particularly cruel in view of the fact that he invoked Venus, the all pervasive impulse in life, to help him write his book. G. B. S., who conceivably may have borrowed his idea of a Life-Force from the Latin poet, has found that it doesn't pay to indite a *præmium* to this demiurge, while prefaces do. It was his tutelary goddess, probably, who lured Lucretius to stumble upon the principle of the movies, at that period lurking unknown in the world. When he discovered it, he decided that the love potion could do him no further hurt. And so he became mad. This loss of mental balance has been embellished and much eked out by poets like Tennyson who, if they borrowed from Lucretius, borrowed nobly as one gentleman might do from another, with no surety of repayment.

But let us not at this late date begin a hue and cry of plagiarism. Let us examine briefly Lucretius's theory itself. To be sure, a theory is but a pale adumbration of the fourth largest industry in the United States. My

nimble witted historian, I take it, had in mind the fourth book of "De Rerum Natura" when he fastened the genesis of the movies upon the Latin poet. It may be that one day while reading Lucretius he seemed to see light all of a sudden or he just hazarded a guess — a brilliant guess, it must be admitted. A guess, in fact, that is priceless beyond words like that wonderful mountain Potosi, which Sir Thomas Browne speaks of, whose bowels are raked, not unprofitably, for rich metal.

Lucretius, I gather, held that animate and inanimate objects gave off a sort of filmy death mask or a fine haze of light or a drifting fragrance of color, as it were, which collided with the lenses of the eye and so compelled us to take note of them. In the case of moving objects the films meet and blend. In one place he speaks of the curtains hung over the Roman theatre, fluttering and tinting the persons of the senators and the matrons below. "The hues of the curtains", he says, "dapple these and the more the walls of the theatre are shut in, the more do these objects suffused with the colors of the curtains (the light sifting through) tend to dazzle us with both movement and color."

Thus was the theory. But apart from the theory, what better two reel comedy than the solemn robed senators capering about in all their super-added glory of color! A crazy accordionlike staircase, a custard pie or two — and the picture is ready to be hatched or "shot", whatever the vernacular is. But what of Lucretius while the camera men are "shooting" away for all they are worth? Where is he at this moment? Is he shouting commands with that megaphone at his lips? Not he! He is in hiding somewhere, I fancy, maybe inside that rustic cabin set for a thrilling five reeler.

Alone, he implores all creative Venus,
he squeezes the pale hand of tranquillity
to his sinking heart, and is seized
with a penetrating nostalgia for beauty
and death. And so perhaps, as another
poet says of him,

He denied
Divinely the divine and died
Chief poet of the Tiber-side.

When we put down Lucretius's book
at last — high thought sweetened with
lyric imagery — we cannot help thinking
that the motion picture producers
all over the world owe him at least the
tribute of a memorial urn or granite
block. I dare say, when they are fully
acquainted with the part Lucretius
played in assisting at the birth of the
cinema industry, they will not hesitate
to do something. Some will, I suppose,
burn an electric bulb to his memory
in their luxurious shrines. Sufficient
enthusiasm might be awakened
to dispatch an expedition of savants
to Rome for the purpose of exhuming
his sacred ashes and so transplant
them to New York or Los Angeles or
Fort Lee where, by an odd turn in
men's affairs, they may be said now
properly to belong. A number of directors
will wish to have struck a
small marble likeness of the Latin poet
to preside over the inner sanctum of
their studios. Others may hit upon
the inspirational idea of distributing
photographs of the poet instead of
dividends when next stock day comes
around. Whatever the producers do,
it may be reasonably expected that
they will not inscribe the portraits of
the gentle Roman poet with the following
cloistral lines taken from his
great poem:

Naught sweeter than to hold the tranquil
realms
On high, well bastioned round with wise
men's lore,
Whence to gaze down on other far afield,

Dazed wayfarers questing a road of life —
Glimpse day and night men strain with
amazing toil
To climb to dizzy power and grasp the
world.