A LITERATURE OF THE SCREEN?

By Ralph Block

SEVERAL years of exposure to the plaintive queries of playwrights and novelists and the rosy declarations of scenario writers, have hardened me to any argument about the "future literature of the screen". The novelists and playwrights, after they have looked at the cashier's check to make sure the figures are right, always suggest peevishly that they suppose their art is once more in for butchery. Scenario writers live in dreams of the day when the screen will end its parasitic career, feeding on the creative genius of the theatre and the novel.

Even to think of a literature of the screen, now or in the future, is to begin with a misconception. Only an Hibernian such as Rex Ingram, might adequately discuss such an idea, by answering that when we produce a literature of the screen, it won't be a literature of the screen. The mistake lies in thinking of the art of the motion camera and of the screen as a secondary process, a derived art, as a literature at all. Its greatest handicap has always been the inability of audiences and creators alike — until recently — to think of it as a direct medium of presentation. Audiences have been stimulated by various causes to think of it as another form of play or novel or short story. Screen creators, with second hand pride, have thought of it in terms of adaptation, translation into one coherent form of any one or all of the other three.

This generalization does exclude, and intentionally, those creative spirits who aim to use the screen abstractly, as nearly like music as possible. Their art, which exists as yet only in theory, aims to harmonize forms and develop structures of abstract thought, with light in motion as the medium of expression, instead of sound as in music. But for the purposes of this exposition, when I speak of the screen I mean that great vulgar phenomenon of a modern mechanistic existence, which in Peoria and Park Avenue alike is called the movies. Regardless of the moving tide of today's sophistication and tomorrow's satiety, the living world continues ceaselessly curious of itself, its loves, hates, dreams and battles; and never before has it had so free an opportunity to see its reflected image as the movies provide.

But this fact has long been self evident. What the movies need now, to gain new vitality and a renewed hold on that audience that tires of old ways of telling old stories, is a master to invent new and strange ways of story telling. He must be rich enough in life to invent a new idiom and common enough to make it say the old things over in new ways, which is indeed the course every great art has followed in

its time. But this idiom must be of the camera, powerful enough to make old appearances significant and newly interesting — not to the theorist and æsthetician, but to Lizzie. This man will not be Chaplin, who is after all an intellectual, not Von Stroheim, still breathing heavily in the age of Zola, nor Lubitsch, an aristocrat among hucksters. He will be not unlike the Griffith of the early days, but rid of the stereotyped forms which the repetitions of a conventionalized art have enforced.

Lacking this power now, the movies have gone back to the classic form of the well made play, and week by week show their power to out-Sardou Sardou in their mastery of plot and construction. This is an instinctive gesture toward safety; even if characterization is weak, plot always has a power of its own. Audiences have learned likewise to lean upon plot, and have through years of stimulation developed a plot hunger, akin to their own workaday desire to see "things come out right". But in the end, as M. André Gide somewhere once declared, character alone is drama, and without it there can be no plot. The future of the screen lies in some great dreamer in camera terms, able to make the celluloid unfolding of character more fascinating, more closely related to the desires and dreams of modern audiences, than that mere unwinding of contingent events which is plot can ever become. When this Messiah arrives, the screen will have passed through its second period, and will have entered the Hals, Rubens, Van Dyck, Vermeer, Rembrandt, Dürer, Holbein, Velasquez stretch of its history.

Welcome as this coming may be to some, its eventuation will no longer provide easy journeys for fluent penmen to Palm, Waikiki, and other beaches. The day of a literature of the screen will have come and have gone. The visual evidences of an art of the screen will be in the celluloid exhibits themselves, among the archives. They will bear the names of gentlemen — and undoubtedly ladies — who in an increasingly visual world will have been tempted to set down graphically their reactions to life, not by brush and oil or typewriter and pen, but by camera and celluloid. The screen itself will be the literature of the screen, to which all litterateurs of today may, borrowing from Montague Glass, look forward in anticipation, God forbid.