

TEACHER'S GUIDE

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MISSION 4: "City of Immigrants"

A Journalist Defends the New Picture Shows

At the beginning of the twentieth century, movies, still in their infancy, began to replace stage shows as favorite sources of entertainment for the working classes. In this article, published in 1911, a journalist explains the allure of the "picture shows" for young, working-class audiences.



It is drama, and it is travel, and it is even beauty, all in one. A wonderful thing it is, and to know how wonderful I suppose you must be poor and have in your life no books and no pictures and no means of travel or seeing beautiful places, and almost no amusements of any kind; perhaps your only door of escape or only means of forgetfulness more drink than is good for you. Then you will know what a moving-picture show really means, although you will probably not be able to put it into words.

We talk a good deal about the censorship of picture shows, and pass city ordinances (laws) to keep the young from being corrupted by them: and this is all very well, because a great amusement of the people ought to be kept clean and sweet; but at the same time this discussion has left a sort of feeling in the minds of people who do not need to go to the picture show that it is a doubtful sort of a place, where young girls and men [make] undesirable acquaintances, and where the prowler lies in wait for the unwary, and where suggestive films of crime and passion are invariably displayed. But I think that this is an unjust idea, and that any one who will take

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the trouble to amuse himself with the picture show audiences for an afternoon or two will see why it is that the making of films has become a great industry, why it is that the picture show has driven out the vaudeville and the melodrama.

You cannot go to any one of the picture shows in New York without having a series of touching little adventures with the people who sit near you, without overhearing chance words of a naiveté and appreciation that make you bless the living picture book that has brought so much into the lives of the people who work.

Source: Excerpt from Mary Heaton Vorse, "Some Picture Show Audiences," illustrated by Wladyslaw T. Benda. Outlook 98, 24 June 1911, p. 442.