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THE MOUNTEBANK AT THE MOVIES

One of these days, that grinning, orating, canting, back-slapping, guitar-strumming, platitude-burbling, complacency-stroking, power-pilfering phony on the platform, in the pulpit, in the newspaper columns, in the movies, on the radio, on television, on every rostrum for public attraction, diversion, persuasion, and just plain confectionery swindling, is going to take his fated pratfall and get what he deserves!

So runs the persistent hope or dream—or even, occasionally, the happy reality threading through the folklore of entertainment: the strain of self-criticism that is another face of the self-protective fickleness by which people eventually save themselves, once in a while, from their own intoxication with their self-created popularity. The Athenians depended upon occasional ostracism, and the republican Romans upon assassination, to protect themselves from the ominous ingratiation of their idols. The publics of "the new era of the common man" must rely upon the at once coarser and subtler device of simply ceasing to applaud—and then denying attention to anyone who isn't being applauded. Even as they lavish credulity and adulation, they search out imperfections and scandal, relishing the exhibition of equated qualities and frailties until there has been just enough noise and smoke and oozing empathy to induce the salutary yawn of democracy.

The rise and fall of the false messiah, the demagogue, the mountebank with his fingers in the till of popular favor, is a perennial subject for parable—the more apposite, perhaps, in our time of electronic magnifications of sounds and images, yet still quite familiar, and comforting. It is not even inconsistent that the mountebank's own media are used to expose and ridicule him. In fact, it is appropriate that there be movies and radio and television shows as homeopathic antidotes against the toxic raptures of continual entertainment. But there ought to be no simple faith in lasting cures—especially when the antidotes are taken largely for the same purposes, and work mainly as they attract, divert, and generally enthrall the mind of critical faculties.

A principal reason for the ultimate indeterminacy of even the most effective parables of this kind is that the public that is being taken in, victimized—and eventually vindicated, of course, in the mountebank's downfall—is rarely shown clearly to be the same public watching or listening to the story. Moreover, in the manner of the familiar folk fantasies of the overthrow of witches, evil kings, and mortgage-wielding villains, it is only through the working of sentimentally punctual chance that justice is done. The public in the story is saved in the nick of time, not by anything it can do itself, but by some turn of melodrama that is really beyond the powers of the public to accomplish. The public hearing or watching the story, then, is really left with no sense of there being anything it can do with its own evil creatures—except, of course, to wait for the comfortably inevitable outcome, as in the story. This sentimentalism may be basically wholesome, to be sure, showing the heart of the public to be in the right place, and hoping for the right kind of fate for evil. It may occasionally be close to reality, as even the most successful evil cannot withstand the impartiality of accident. But there is hardly reason to expect that such a story will cure the addiction to stories.

The problem has to do with how well the public recognizes itself in films about the public. The game of debunking the popularly great may go no further than a kind of childish cruelty: a little turnabout mockery for a moment when the crowd refreshes its docility in a communal snicker—unless the people come to really know that they have been playing, at something that isn't a game.

The seriousness of films such as *The Great Man, A Face In The Crowd,* and *The Sweet Smell of Success* is made ultimately playful by their melodramatically satisfying conclusions. There may be no question that the sort of thing they try to do, whether it works completely or not, shows audiences some sharp pictures of despicable successes of the insolently sovereign underworlds of radio, television, scandal-scented journalism, and privately-serving public relations. But the audience is shown its own face only occasionally, and then rarely with such fidelity that there is recognition.

Like the fairy tale "mirror, mirror, on the wall," the entertainment film characteristically reflects the viewers' projection of "the fairest of them all"—often for the deliberate purpose of explaining the precise experience they are supposed to be having. In films about singers, or musicians, or comedians, or athletes, or others who perform while people watch and listen, the action involving the performance itself typically instructs the audience in the theatre by carefully moving from the figure of the performer to the faces of the fictive spectators—again and again, until

it is quite clear that we, on both sides of the screen, are expected to be enraptured by the greatest little lady who ever "socked over" a song, or the greatest dancer, or the greatest this or that.

The device is another form of the cheer-leading that pervades the popular media, whereby the audience is ingested by its own creatures. There are, for example, the signs in radio and television studios calling up laughter, applause, and other rehearsed responses; or the sacramental rites of popularity polls and audience rating systems, in which the public looks on happily as its own entrails are minutely examined for auguries; or the pages and pages of so-called newspapers and periodicals of topical journalism, devoted to the perpetual indoctrination of successive generations of readers in the conjugation of entertainment and events, until the only events are entertainment, and entertainers and entertained are distinguishable only in the aspect of the angle of reportage. The most revealing rituals of all may be the amateur talent contests, and perhaps particularly, the benefit performances, wherein the audience takes so much part in its own entertainment, for a worthy cause, and the lines between the real world and the world of show business are so deliberately, sentimentally blurred, as the show of enjoyment is itself enjoyed: *e.g.,* "Ladies and gentlemen, wouldn't you like to give this grand old trouper a great big hand?"

It is probably significant that the films *The Great Man, A Face In The Crowd,* and *The Sweet Smell of Success* followed upon one another so closely. There may be some validity in the view that the movie people are having some innings at the expense of rival, frequently hostile media—especially radio and television. There are, in any case, at least two sides to the game of disparagement. If the movies do portray radio and television as supermarkets for packaged sham and sugared demagoguery, television has been relishing a long series of dramas presenting the motion-picture industry as a great, gilded cesspool, in which creative integrity sinks until it is merely undistinguishable from the residual slime of success. *The Hollywood Award Winner,* for example, strategically telecast a few days before the Academy Award presentations early in 1957, was quite clear about the artistic honesty of television, and the shoddy commercialism of the movies. Written by Dick Berg for Kaiser Aluminum, the play depicted the disillusionment of a young, idealistic television writer who has been called to Hollywood to translate one of his crusading plays into a movie script. His dreams of dramatic integrity are ground into box-office hamburger by an unscrupulous, success-serving producer. But television virtue triumphs in the end, as the producer is shown to be terribly unhappy, for all his power and glory, and the honest writer announces that he is going to stick it out in

Hollywood, fighting the good fight for the true and the beautiful, come what guerdons may.

It is interesting how many of the moralities dealing basically with the public's images of its heroes and of itself have as their narrators or protagonists the familiar figure of the reporter-writer, who, representing the public's conscience, sees all and eventually tells it. The character of the writer, personifying the search after and publication of the truth—although temporarily wallowing in the rewarding filth of crime, political corruption, crooked sporting events, and commercial malefactions—is commonplace in the movies. This image, created, after all, by writers, may be traced to nineteenth-century ideologies and romanticisms of the role of artists and intellectuals. But nearer origins are unquestionably found in the class-conscious, social-reformative literature of the Depression. In parables of good and evil in the mass media, the observer-writer is almost a necessity. The public itself, apparently, cannot otherwise be personfied—although it is equally apparent that the writer's very role inevitably places him outside the public, even at the moment when he is speaking for it.

In *The Great Man,* it is a radio reporter, played by José Ferrer (who also directed and helped write the screenplay with Al Morgan, from the latter's novel), who eventually speaks for the public, exposing—posthumously, but still in the nick of time—the fraudulence of a leading radio and television "personality." The film has sharp, cocktail-classy dialogue, the suggestion, with relish, of the skulduggery and lechery within the soundproofed walls of network broadcasting—and the clear distortions of faint resemblances to real people. Beneath the emery-paper veneer, however, is a familiar show-business melodrama of backstage intrigue, treachery, and eventual triumph for embattled righteousness. The commerciality of commercial radio is significantly avoided, the word "sponsor" being heard only in a wisecrack or two, the referential power never appearing in whatever indictment of evils is being made.

The face of the crowd, however, is more seriously obscured; glimpsed occasionally, but finally hidden behind the surrogate image of the reporter-rescuer. The same face, whose features the mass media mountebank wears as a mask, is almost recognizable in *A Face In The Crowd,* directed by Elia Kazan from Budd Schulberg's screen play. The mountebank, whose face emerges from the crowd to become its face for a while, is here a guitar-playing, country-music-singing hillbilly hobo, Andy Griffith, magnified by television into a monster of seductive megalomania—combining resemblances to a wide choice of idols — reaching from influence

upon the purchase of mattresses and vitamin pills towards political power. Again, however, the sentimental miracle happens just in time, as the girl who discovered him and managed his rise, Patricia Neal, finally thinks with her brains instead of her glands, and works an improbable exposure over a nationwide network. And again, it is the ubiquitous writer, Walter Matthau, who gets out of television's gaudy grubstreet just in time to lecture the public on what the public is seeing—without making plain, however, that the public must see itself first and clearest of all. Kazan and Schulberg—who worked together on *On the Waterfront*—are drawing a cartoon, with brushes and inks out of the documentary and neo-realistic cinema, and the cartoon is bold and exciting, if too hurriedly outlined. The limitations of exaggeration and therapeutic melodrama, however, are reached at all the points where the people in the theatres do not recognize themselves in the caricatures on the screen.

The writer as public conscience may himself become a monster, too—which may be seen as a "switch" on the mass media mountebank theme that is worked in *The Sweet Smell of Success.* This film again exemplifies the developing genre of what may be called the *cinema à clef,* in which the likenesses of the characters to actual persons add caustic purposes to the fictions. Here, "J.J.", the great newspaper gossip columnist and television panjandrum, mongering scandal, obsessive patriotism, and counterfeit sentimentality as the merchandise of what is essentially a vast business of public blackmail, is a figure of such coruscating malevolence as to resemble only a caricatured archetype. The best living, breathing caricature of this kind, of course, can be recognized as regnant over commonfolk everywhere from a throne in snobbish nightclubs, fawned upon and supplied with endless dribbles of ordure and inconsequential anecdotes concerning the determinedly notorious by a court of sycophantic *condottieri.* The film's sense of the world in which he has been absolute monarch for so long, like an Assassin Grand Master, is accurately acrid.

The screen play by Clifford Odets and Ernest Lehman is the most fluently bitter of all the contemporary antidotes against the poisons of popularity—albeit more narrowly specific, and therapeutically limited, to begin with. The direction of Scotsman Alexander Mackendrick, known heretofore for delightfully wry comedies like *High and Dry,* achieves an off-beat, drumming impact—although the rhythms eventually become relentlessly frenetic as if intended only to mesmerize or fatigue the sensibilities, rather than to stimulate them. Some unusual casting presents Burt Lancaster as the brutally brilliant columnist, and Tony Curtis, in his best performance, as a greasy pimp of the publicity profession.

Again, however, the film, in necessarily offering another entertainment to be enjoyed, makes too little more than entertainment of the matter of the idolization of entertainers. The outcome again is comforting, as the monster mountebank's weakness is symbolized in his loss of hegemony over his young sister. The melodrama of the finale, however, with all its irony, suggests the weakness not of the mountebank, but of his creators and creatures. The audience appears only by inference, as the source and expression of his power—and never with that vital clarity that will reveal the whole, true face of the mountebank, on both sides of the screen.