Pace in the Movies

A Famous Director Reveals the Secret of Good Pictures

An Article by DAVID WARK GRIFFITH

For a quick, keen estimate of a motion picture, give me a boy of ten and a girl of fifteen—the boy for action, the girl for romance. Few things have happened in their lives to affect their natural reactions. To them a picture lives or dies by the pace it carries.

Pace is a new word to describe an idea which is old in the motion-picture industry, but one which I doubt has been brought—at least, in the way I intend to bring it—to the public’s conscious notice. Pace means the life of a picture—the verve, the elan, as the French would express it—the intangible something that sweeps the drama across the screen in absorbing cycles of action and suspense.

Unconsciously, you probably have noticed it many times, and, acting upon the emotions which it inspired in you, have turned your thumbs up and down on film productions involving hundreds of millions of dollars.

The success of individual photoplays is variously accounted for. There can be no doubt that perhaps the most familiar explanation—the personal popularity of stars—is capable of exercising an enormous influence upon a picture’s vogue.

Yet stars rise and fall. Fads in plot material—the Sabatini historical novel and the Fitzgerald Odyssey of the flapper—likewise flourish and decline; while numerous films that have neither a great star nor an original plot idea to recommend them—and I have in mind such pictures as Over the Hill—suddenly transcend all their normal expectations of popularity, and drop fortunes into their producers’ laps.

The public’s own interpretation of the phenomenon is that these are “good” pictures. But it is interesting to inquire more closely into what the public means by that somewhat ambiguous word, because the quest leads into the soul of the movies, where there resides something that is greater than stars, and stories, and little tricks of the trade.

That something I have called pace. It is a part of the pulse of life itself, and, being common to all human consciousness, its insistent beat has the curious power to seduce and sway the emotions, as the rhythmic tread of marching troops sways a suspended bridge. When the pace of a picture weds the pulse of an audience, the results are astonishing. During showings of 'Way Down East I have seen people jump from their seats; and what habitual movie-goers cannot recall instances when rapt spectators have cried out advice to the actors?

For its ability thus to lift its patrons out of commonplace existence, and bear them hither and yon on Bagdad carpets to realms of adventure and romance, the photoplay depends upon pace.

The touchstone of a picture’s appeal is pace; pace is the secret of the director’s art.

No other medium of dramatic expression lends itself so naturally to effective use. The darkened theater, the rest of all eyes for a long period upon a given spot—the screen—and the ease with which the mind absorbs visual impressions, are circumstances in the showing of a movie which suggest a hypnotist’s technique.

Add pace—the ebb and flow of pleasurable tides of excitement, the rhythmic movement of events toward the ecstatic consummation of romantic and adventurous dreams—and it is easy for people to delude themselves into believing that, in some strange way, the romance and adventure are their own.

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Without pace, the darkened theater, the concentration of attention, and the quick perception of what our eye remains stagnant possibilities of a delightful sensation. Pace sets them in motion, deftly directs and develops their possibilities and the sensation—the vivid realization of ideas—accurs to the spectators of the silent drama.

Nature has cut several perfect patterns for the pace of a motion picture.

Take a familiar example, and one that reveals nearly every element of drama. I mean a summer storm.

Into the scene the sky come quietly, almost casually, a few clouds. Gradually they mass themselves and darken ominously, warning you that they are about the business of their plot. They have already shed their pristine aspect of innocent white tufts. They have donned a make-up of dark fierceness, like the black scowl of a man's violent moods.

A period of almost total calm heightens the suspense, or upsets the action, as we might say in the films. Then occurs a burst of lightning, a gust of wind, and the low rumble of thunder. Everything is set, as it ought to be for the climax of either a spoken play or a film. Nature is a faultless dramatist.

NEVER has there been such a sharp critic of pace as the American audience. Whenever a director fails too much with character portrayal, or other things collateral to the main theme of the story, he is promptly and decisively punished.

Whenever you hear a spectator say: "For the love of Pete, why don't they do something!" it probably isn't the acting or the story, but that it's pace.

But there's something else to pace besides a swift succession of events. Drama must have cadence, like the rise and fall of a familiar voice. This is the hypnotic quality of its paceKEYSTROKEU that also have (fortissimo and pianissimo—it must strike deep, vibrant notes and light, inconsequential ONE—else its spell will be broken and the auditor be driven to desperation, as by the ceaseless repetition of a single sound. And pace in the movies is responsible for the harmonious development of these crescendos, from the small, provocative phrases of a drama's beginning to the great, resonant chords of climax that should mark its end.

In the practical production of these climaxes, opinion is divided into two schools; but the human pulsebeat, as the criterion of pacing, is perceived in both. The American school (and I describe it in that way because it has been generally adopted in American films) makes an effort to keep the picture in tune with the average human heartbeat, which, of course, increases in rapidity under such influences as excitement, and may almost stop in moments of profound suspense.

The other method, which may be called the German type because it has been widely employed by the German directors, shows the unfolding of the picture until the pulse races on ahead of it.

Both methods have been used by American directors. From 1912 to 1916 (when I was carrying on a series of experiments, making one picture with normal pace, the next with underpacing; and the reactions of many audiences were carefully recorded.) The results greatly favored the pictures paced with the beat of the pulse.

That was the decision of American audi-
dence instinctively realizes that if must be so, the director's craftsmanship gives to his shadowy figures the breath of life.

It is common to think of art and mechanics as hereditary foes. But they are not always so. Indeed, an inherent mechanical obstacle (if you care to call it that) in the exhibition of motion pictures is responsible, primarily, for their highest artistic development.

The ordinary program picture consists of seven reels of from 900 to 950 feet each. Each foot of film contains sixteen individual pictures (or "frames") which are thrown upon the screen at the rate of about thirteen frames a second. Thus, when the picture is shown, 100,000 separate images present themselves to the eye in about an hour and a quarter.

I have alluded to the semihypnotic effect on the audience of the enforced concentration of its vision upon the screen. The effect is of incalculable value to the director (for rea-
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Some I have already described) but it is fraught with danger.

If the picture were made so that each scene contained the same (or even approximately the same) number of frames, the "serpentine effect" would become the "hypnotic effect," and the audience would drop into the Land of Nod.

To escape this eventual result of monotonous repetition, the director is forced to vary the length of his so-called shots—whether he has any conception of pace or not.

To illustrate: Let us imagine a love scene. The director desires to pace it in the rhythm of a waltz, or in scenes whose lengths are multiples of three.

A boy and girl are seated on a stone wall beside a country road. The camera records them as full-length figures in a long shot for a count of six—three seconds. Then the camera moves closer, picturing the boy talking earnestly with the girl, for a count of twelve. Placed closer still, the camera photographs the boy pleading with her, for a count of twelve. A close-up of the girl is made. She registers indifference. The count is three, or a second and a half—the basic of the tempo.

The camera turns back to the boy’s troubled face, for a count of six. He swings down from the wall and the camera moves back to record that action, for a count of nine. The girl is interested now. She watches the boy, as he turns away from her. Count six.

Suddenly the boy apprehends and reserves his pleading. The girl seems to be yielding. Such a scene would probably run to the count of twelve, because of its importance.

All these are the simple fundamentals of direction; the serious task arrives when the players must put the pacing into their movements. For the moment, imagine the living-room of a heroine. This set has been erected in the studio to be held until all the scenes occurring in that room have been taken—say, twenty.

One scene will show the boy in his first effort to woo the girl; for which a suitable pacing would be slow waltz time.

The next scene, taken directly afterward but appearing in the fourth reel of the film, may show them in a lovers’ quarrel.

Each of the twenty scenes taken in the set will have a different pacing because the scenes will appear at different intervals through the film; and their pace must be the same tempo as the scenes that precede and follow them.

I have always found it necessary to depend entirely upon memory and judgment in this pacing of scenes, never having found a record chart which was simple or exact. In the earlier days my judgment slipped once, with the result that the hero raged out of the room as though he were going to do nothing less than slay the entire neighborhood; and in the next scene, showing the exterior, he marched sedately out the door and moved meditatively away as if the most violent thing he had in mind was to read a few chapters of Chinese philosophy.

The pace must be quickened from beginning to end. This is not, however, a steady ascent. The action must quicken to a height in a minor climax, then slow down and build again to the next climax, which should be faster than the first, retard again, and build to the third, which should be faster than the second, and on to the major climax, where the pace should be fastest. Through the high moments of the story the pace should be like the beat of an excited pulse. A Confederate veteran, after seeing The Birth of a Nation, said: "I never got so excited all the time we were fighting the Yanks as I did seeing this picture."

The pacing locked step with his pulse and nearly undid the old gentleman, who had twelve grandchildren with him.

In this way PICTURE fans will find it a fascinating pastime to measure their pulse beats with the pacing of motion pictures. Please don’t try it the first time you view the film. Give it a chance to interest and amuse and arouse you on your first visit. But when you go back, surrender yourself to the picture as you did at first. Then, when there is quickened action, a climax or a tense situation, feel your pulse and see if it isn’t going about the same beat as the pace in the drama.

You will find that it is, for the very good reason that the whole science of pace in the drama is founded upon your pulse.

After all, there is nothing new, mysterious, or complex about this business of pacing. It is as old as the beating of the first barbaric drum. And didn’t the first drummer get the idea of his strokes from the beating of his pulse? What else?

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