
ARTS & LETTERS

Numbers Game

"Cultural Inflation" by Marion Muller, in *The New Leader* (Sept. 25, 1978), 212 Fifth Ave., New York, N.Y. 10010.

Americans are being inundated with culture. The mass marketing of art through highly-publicized special exhibits (e.g., the *Mona Lisa* in 1963, Michelangelo's *Pieta* in 1964, the "Treasures of Tutenkhamun" in 1978) has drawn such enormous crowds that the viewing public seldom has more than a brief glimpse of what is being shown. (More than 1 million people pay to see the "Tut" exhibit at Manhattan's Metropolitan Museum of Art while the museum's own superb Egyptian galleries are virtually ignored.)

"The current trend toward wholesale dissemination of culture does not permit understanding on a profound level," says art critic Muller. Concentration on the sheer number of visitors, she writes, is likely to worsen the already excessive emphasis by museums on what is safe and conventional.

Museum directors are being forced by tight budgets to draw the public any way they can, and the public can hardly be blamed for responding to the excitement of heavily-promoted cultural exhibits. The role of the responsible critic in this situation, Muller says, is to provide historical perspective (and thereby "neutralize the hysteria"), to encourage high aesthetic standards, and to remind the layman that spending an entire hour with one Cezanne painting is a more valuable personal experience than spending a half-hour with 100 Cezanne paintings.

The New Wave of Sound

"The Second Coming of Sound" by Charles Schreger, in *Film Comment* (Sept.-Oct. 1978), 1865 Broadway, New York, N.Y. 10023.

With the release of *The Jazz Singer* by Warner Bros. in October, 1927, Hollywood launched the era of talking pictures, and the nation's ailing film industry began to revive. Now, America once again seems "sound-obsessed," writes Schreger, a reporter for *Variety* in Hollywood.

Younger audiences (the 18-30 year olds who also buy record albums and expensive stereo equipment), are demanding films that offer audio as well as visual excellence. Innovative filmmakers (Robert Altman, Michael Cimino, Francis Coppola, Milos Forman, Stanley Kubrick, Alan J. Pakula, and Steven Spielberg) have responded by introducing "the second Sound Revolution."

Robert Altman is the filmmaker who has probably experimented most with sound to gain heightened realism. As early as *Countdown* (1967), he employed overlapping dialogue, or, as he calls it, "live sound effects." He used eight-track recording systems and wired each per-

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former with a tiny radio microphone. The sound was broadcast live to a central recording unit.

Besides distinguishing individual sounds more clearly, the system allows for greater improvisation. Actors can interrupt each other—as people do in real life—and the director need not worry about the sight, or shadow, of cables and overhead microphones.

Altman's search for the perfect sound system led him to Ray Dolby, the Englishman who invented the Dolby noise-reduction system that takes the hiss out of stereo tapes, FM radios, and records, and allows for sharper high and low tones (like the ominous low rumbling of the mother ship in Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*).

Walter Murch, who created the beautifully intricate "sounds track" of George Lucas's film, *The Conversation*, believes that the technical potential of film sound has been reached—now it is up to the movie directors to exploit it. With a general upgrading of theater sound systems, Schreger concludes, "we may truly enter a period in film history that will someday be labeled the Second Coming of Sound."

A Fear of Sinking

"Mark Twain: The Writer as Pilot" by Edgar J. Burde, in *PMLA* (Fall 1978), 62 Fifth Ave., New York, N.Y. 10011.

In 1880, Samuel Clemens wrote that he would eagerly live his life over if he could be recognized as the "Celebrated Master Pilot of the Mississippi." In fact, says Burde, professor of English at the State University of New York (Plattsburgh), Clemens was both fascinated and terrified by the memory of his earlier life as a riverboat pilot. This conflict provides clues to his creative imagination as the writer, Mark Twain.

Clemens' sense of the personal freedom and power of a Mississippi pilot (a power which came from instinct and intuition) was matched by a fear that he lacked the moral and technical competence for the job, that he was too timid. Horace Bixby, the master pilot in Clemens' "Old Times on the Mississippi" articles published by the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1875, explains, "You only learn the shape of the river: and you learn it

*To Mark Twain,
the riverboat
pilot was king—
proud, fearless,
talented, and
independent.*

