

The roots of the cinema conspiracy

by Michael J. Minnicino

The official history of the development of films runs like one of the multi-part "sagas" which have been proliferating on prime-time television: immigrant moguls and starlets, wild-eyed Russian revolutionaries, and haggard French intellectuals, all contributing to the growth of a great, but corrupt art. As EIR's six-part exposé of the origins of the "movies" in the psychological warfare and social control departments of Harvard University and the London Tavistock Institute will document, however, this version should satisfy credulous university film students only. In Part I, series author Michael Minnicino elaborates the work of Fabian "poet" Vachel Lindsay and Harvard professor Hugo Munsterberg, on how the mass-consumed motion picture can be used to degrade the cultural powers of populations through an attack on true drama and the spoken language.

The movies: psychological warfare as a fine art *First of a six-part series*

The modern world film industry and its later partner, television, were founded at the Psychological Laboratory of Harvard University in the period before World War I. Harvard at that time was involved in a research project to determine the best techniques to rapidly transform the personality. The laboratory's chief, William James, America's leading psychologist and brother of the novelist Henry, had already done some groundbreaking work on the subject with his *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1901-02). *Varieties* had demonstrated that induced mystical experiences comparable to a hypnotic or drugged state, especially when combined with long periods of sensory deprivation (as produced by long periods of bed-rest subsequent to accident or serious illness), could radically restructure a subject's personality.

James was in constant contact with colleagues studying the same topic. In Germany, several universities were working on the problem led by the Kaiser Wilhelm Institute in Berlin. Most of Britain's major schools had research teams and, by the early 1920s, these teams would coalesce into a unified study group called the Tavistock Clinic, under the directorship of Dr. John Rawlings Rees. The Germans inclined toward electroshock and drugs; the English dabbled in psychosurgery as well as drugs, but, like the Americans under the leadership of James, a confirmed spiritualist, more deeply delved into the potentials offered by synthetic cults.

This research was carried on for decades under several names and with variegated official sponsorship. After the Korean War, it all got popularly lumped under a general title, a literal translation of a catchy communist Chinese phrase: "brainwashing."

The task to which James, Rees, et al. applied themselves is an ancient one: how can a very few—an oligarchy—control the many without overt, repressive violence? In ancient Rome, for instance, mystical cults fed by drugs, such as the Dionysian and Isis sects, had been useful to the oligarchy. But the situation that faced the British-dominated oligarchy at the turn of the twentieth century was substantially more complicated, largely because the United States had developed into a world power committed to technological progress, including policy factions which wished to share that commitment with less developed people around the world. The theorists of the new oligarchy such as Bertrand Russell and H. G. Wells were adamant: the old techniques would have to be technologized if control were to be maintained.

It was under this standing order to find a better way to control the mind that William James and his colleagues discovered the film.

Experiments in making photographs "move" had been going on throughout the second half of the 19th century. They culminated in Thomas A. Edison's kinoscope, the first true motion picture camera, which was unveiled to the public at the Chicago Exhibition in 1893. Edison's peepshows became an overnight sensation, and it was only months before an English impresario developed a projecting device and opened the first movie theater. By the turn of the century, most major towns in America and Western Europe had theaters or could

see films as interludes at stage shows. Film attendance was 10 million per day by 1914.

The potential importance of film apparently came to the attention of the Harvard laboratory via one Horace M. Kallen, an instructor at Harvard's Philosophy Department (of which James was titular head). In 1910 Kallen wrote the first recorded scholarly paper on film, stressing, according to one historian, the striking "magical" qualities of the new technique.

"The prophet-wizards of Isis"

A device capable of producing "magic" on a mass-basis clearly required the attention of the Harvard team. And attention it got: within six years after the publication of Kallen's paper, Harvard's faculty, aided significantly by Russell and Wells's partisans in the American Fabian movement, had transformed film from a toy into a "fine art" in the mind of the public; at the congratulating themselves on finding a powerful new tool for social manipulation. They had found a new cult, one much better than old Dionysian variants: the cult of entertainment.

Although millions of pages on film and film theory have been written since World War I, there is really *nothing* in them that is any more than a reworking of the theory and purpose of film outlined in two remarkable books generated out of Harvard in 1915-16: *The Art of the Moving Picture* by Vachel Lindsay, and *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study* by Professor Hugo Münsterberg.

Münsterberg (1863-1916) studied under the pioneer Gestalt psychologist Wilhelm Wundt at Germany's Leipzig University, graduating to a professorship at the University of Freiburg, where he met William James and was recruited to James's conspiracy. In 1892, James invited Münsterberg to head the Psychological Laboratory with him; in 1897 Münsterberg also assumed the chair of the school's Philosophy Department, then a bastion of American Fabianism. By the time he published his study on film, Münsterberg had already become somewhat famous as a Fabian racist: when war broke out in 1914, he carried on a lively public correspondence with his British friend Wells, claiming that all the "Anglo-Saxon races" (i.e., the Americans, British, and Germans) should unite against the encroachments of inferior peoples.

In *The Photoplay*, the first film book ever written, Münsterberg identifies immediately the use of the film to the leadership of the Anglo-Saxon races:

An interesting side light falls on [the] relation between the mind and the pictured scenes, if we turn to a mental process which is quite nearly related to those which we have considered, namely, *suggestion*. It is similar in that a suggested idea which awakes in our consciousness is built up from the same material as the memory ideas or the imaginative ideas. The play of associations controls the suggestions. . . .

The spellbound audience . . . in a picture house is *certainly in a state of heightened suggestibility and is ready to receive suggestions* (emphasis added).

According to Münsterberg, the film's power of suggestion—what we today call hypnosis—derived from two principal technical elements. Firstly, the enveloping darkness which the early English experimenters had added to the film experience. Secondly and more important was what Münsterberg called "fixation," more commonly known today as "object fixation." Whereas the presentation of live drama shows the audience a whole stage filled or unfilled with actors and objects, noted Münsterberg, the film is the first technique to achieve the *close-up*, the ability to fill a looming screen with a single object:

If on the stage the hand movements of an actor catch our interest, we no longer look at the whole larger scene, we see only the fingers of the hero clutching the revolver. . . . Our attention is entirely given up to the passionate play of his hand. It becomes the central point for all our emotional responses. . . . The more we fixate it, the more its clearness and distinctness increase. From this one point wells our emotion, and our emotions once again concentrate our senses on this one point. . . . On stage this is impossible. . . .

The close-up has objectified in our world of perception our mental act of attention and by it has furnished art with a means which far transcends the power of any theatre stage (emphasis added).

Münsterberg went on to explain that stage presentations allow too much higher mental functioning in the audience; during a play a viewer still retains what Münsterberg calls "voluntary attention." That is, although a stage director or playwright may use certain techniques to focus the audience's attention on a particular situation, speech, etc., the play-goer still has the option of *not* fixating; he or she can opt to look at the person who is being spoken about or to, rather than the one who is speaking.

This—for most theater-goers an added, pleasing intellectual level of "dialogue"—is for Münsterberg anathema.

The film with its close-up technique excludes the possibility of such intellectual involvement. In film, all attention is "involuntary"; a new scene bursts upon the consciousness like "an explosion . . . the glaring electric signs which flash up." The viewer sees, notwithstanding what his or her mind believes, only what the film director wants him to see. "It is as if," concludes Münsterberg, using words close to James's in *Varieties*, the "outer world were woven into our mind and were shaped not through its own laws but by the acts of our attention."

Vachel Lindsay's 'new hieroglyphics'

It is clear that Münsterberg was himself somewhat fixated

with the differences between the stage and the new film techniques. It was left to the strange Vachel Lindsay to elaborate that fixation. Born in Springfield, Illinois, Lindsay (1879-1931) studied at the Art Institute of Chicago and the Metropolitan Museum in New York before achieving minor fame with his poetry, the most notable of which was an outrageously racist piece of overextended onomatopoeia, *The Congo*. Lindsay traveled in the same Fabian circuits as Münsterberg, lecturing occasionally at Harvard, and became the film critic of the American Fabians' most important organ, the *New Republic*, thus earning the title of America's first regularly published film commentator.

In his *Art of the Moving Picture*, Lindsay said the things that the putative scientist Münsterberg could not say credibly. Film represented the greatest *cult potential* anyone had seen in centuries:

We now have a darkness on which we can paint. . . . This is a tomb we might have definitely in mind, an Egyptian burying-place where with a torch we might enter, read the inscriptions, and see the illustrations of the Book of the Dead on the wall, or finding that ancient papyrus in the mummy-case, unroll it and show it to the eager assembly, and have the feeling of return. Man is an Egyptian first, before he is any other type of civilized being. The Nile flows through his heart. So let this cave be Egypt, let us incline ourselves to revere the unconscious memories that echo within us when we see the hieroglyphics of Osiris, and Isis. . . .

Is it too much to expect that some American prophet-wizard of the future will give us this film in the spirit of an Egyptian priest? . . . Here is a nation, America, going for dreams into caves. . . . Because ten million people daily enter into the cave, something akin to Egyptian wizardry, certain national rituals, will be born. By studying the matter of being an Egyptian priest for a while, the author-producer may learn in the end how best to express and satisfy the spirit-hungers that are peculiarly American.

Film, in short, could provide the means to finally develop the ideologically-specific cults that America had resisted for so long. The Fabian goal of a docile global dictatorship was once again a possibility. Says the enthusiastic Lindsay:

High-minded graduates of university courses in sociology and schools of anthropology, devout readers of the *Survey*, *The Chicago Public*, *The Masses*, the *New Republic*, *LaFollette's* [all Fabian organs—MJM], are going to advocate increasingly, their varied . . . causes in films. . . .

The World State is indeed far away. But as we peer into the Mirror Screen, some of us dare look forward to the time when the pouring streets of men will become sacred in each other's eyes, in pictures, and in fact. . . .

Münsterberg, overwhelmed by the manipulative possibilities, breaks the dry tone of his own book to second Lindsay, telling the Fabian social reformers that they

cannot overlook the fact . . . that the masses of today prefer to be taught by pictures than by words. . . . The fact that millions are daily under the spell of the performances on the screen is established. The high degree of suggestibility during those hours in the dark house may be taken for granted. . . . [T]he photoplay must have an incomparable power for the remolding and upbuilding of the national soul.

What is this new "national soul"? Substantially the one hypothesized by Wells in his *The Time Machine*: a society divided into super-cultured, oligarchic Eloi and a completely bestialized race of workers, the Morlocks.

Hence Münsterberg and Lindsay's fixation with the stage. The full power of the film as a tool of ideological manipulation is stunted in a society in which the audience can compare the photoplay with its raw image to the play with its dialogue. And by dialogue, I mean not only the words themselves, but the dialogue in the Socratic sense that is the core of all drama worthy of the name: the intellectual interplay between the words, the presentation of the actors, and the minds of the audience. Although many stage directors at the time (particularly Max Reinhardt in Germany, whom Münsterberg approvingly cites) had been attempting to reduce dialogue's function on stage and replace it with a panoply of jarring special effects and set design, the stage still presupposes for Lindsay and Münsterberg an unacceptably high level of mental activity.

Rather, language itself must be broken down if the film is to work. Film must create a new language, stresses particularly Lindsay, what he calls a "new hieroglyphics." The stage and literature may continue to exist, but only for the cultured elite. The overwhelming majority of people will not read or go to the theater; they will be entertained by the new Dantes and Shakespeares of the "New Florence"—Lindsay's name for Hollywood.

Lindsay's own words darkly echo Wells' description of the Morlocks:

The invention of the photoplay was as great a step as was the beginning of picture-writing in the stone age. *And the cave-men and women of our slums seem to be the people most affected by this novelty* (emphasis added).

The more fastidious photoplay audience that uses the hieroglyphic hypothesis in analyzing the film before it, will acquire a new tolerance and understanding of the avalanche of photoplay conceptions, and find a promise of beauty.

To be continued.