Why is there no film criticism in Vienna? Why is every operetta turned into a cultural event, but no critics bother with film? Why does no one bother with the art of the people?

Aesthetes may turn up their aristocratic noses, but that does not alter the fact that the cinema has become the art, the poetry, the vision of the people, a decisive element of popular culture. Wondering whether this is good or bad is silly; for in Vienna alone there are already 180, I repeat, 180 cinemas showing films every night. One hundred and eighty cinemas with an average of 450 seats, presenting two or three programs every day. If we figure houses three-quarters full, this amounts to 200,000 people a day. Figure it out for yourself.

For the urban population of today, the cinema is what folk songs and folktales used to be. Please, no aesthetic comparisons. It may annoy us, but it is a sociological fact. And just as folk songs and folktales were subjects of folklore, recalling the cultural history of past centuries, from now on no one will be able to write a history of culture or national psychology without devoting a major chapter to the cinema. Those who see this fact as a great danger are the very ones who have an obligation to help out with constant, earnest, systematic criticism. For this is not something confined to literary salons but a matter of a nation's health.

Moreover, it is high time to do away with aesthetic prejudice against the cinema. It is simply ludicrous that the critic who analyzes with furrowed brow the artistic qualities of an operetta singer refuses to follow the theater's most important and celebrated artists when they venture into the realm of film, and yet today there are no dramatic actors, no matter how serious or talented, who have not tested their art on film, and not only because of the money but because of the aching desire for immortality that every actor feels.

Above all film is a wholly new art emerging from a new culture. However inadequate it may be in its infancy, it deserves our undivided attention. A means of expressing ideas that can affect mankind so universally and so profoundly, owing to the potentially limitless distribution of its technology, must surely compare...
in importance to the technological innovations of Gutenberg in his day. Victor Hugo once wrote that the printed book took over the role of the medieval cathedral. The book became the vehicle for the popular imagination and shredded it into millions of minor views. The book shattered stone: the undivided church split into thousands of books. From visible ideas there evolved readable ideas, from a visual culture a conceptual one. There is no need to discuss any further how this fact has changed the face of human society.

Today, however, another machine is giving human society new forms of ideas. The many millions of people who sit back every evening and watch pictures, wordless pictures depicting human feelings and ideas—these many millions of people are in the process of learning a new language: the long-forgotten language of pantomime, which is now being revived (and on an international scale). Behind every truly new language, however, a new spirit and new modes of perception dwell; and to the degree that it is art, this pantomime is far from the gesticulations replacing concepts and words used by the deaf and dumb. A visual spirit and modes of perception that slumbered out of the reach of words during centuries of abstract, intellectual concepts are gradually resurfacing. Is it possible that we are standing on the threshold of a new visual culture?

This is only, by the way, to suggest that film can serve even the most zealous of aesthetes as a subject for interesting study. It is necessary that one not be frightened off by its initial helplessness. No matter how problematic the products of this art have been to date, its potential is incalculable. Perhaps that potential will be greatly influenced by serious, pertinent, penetrating criticism.

Beginning today, I plan to open my columns to just such pertinent, methodical criticism.