Cinema In Evelyn Waugh’s Vile Bodies Essay, Research Paper

Comment on any one of the leisure activities featured in Evelyn Waugh’s Vile Bodies. Explain if it was a new development of the interwar era.

The interwar period witnessed an explosion of a variety of leisure activities within British society, some of which were new and some of which were not. One such leisure activity was that of the cinema, and featured as a popular pastime in Evelyn Waugh’s Vile Bodies. Whilst the cinema was not a new leisure activity during the interwar era, there were however, developments within this industry that were unique to this period.

The cinema as a form of leisure was not new to British society, and indeed most western industrialised societies, during the interwar era. Prior to World War One it was not much more than a ‘technical curiosity’, but by the 1920s it was the ‘new medium’ and one that was a ‘fully fledged form of art’. (Taylor 1970 p, 180) Throughout most of the 1920s, films shown in cinemas around the world were ’silent’. While silent films were not new to this era, the popularity of them experienced a ‘new’ and unique interest amongst the general public. Indeed, Vile Bodies highlights the popularity of the cinema and in particular, the ’silent’ film as a regularly experienced leisure activity. Waugh’s character, Colonel Blount, is the most obvious representation of the popular interest of films and film making at the time Vile Bodies was written. He tells Adam, after asking his interest in the cinema, that he and the Rector went ‘a great deal’ to the ‘Electra Palace’. (Waugh 1930 p, 59)

Furthermore, the films themselves were more often than not, directed at certain sections of society, for example women, immigrants and the youth. This often aided in attracting such sections of society to the cinema.

The overall appeal of the cinema to the masses was particularly evident during the interwar era. Audiences worldwide wanted to watch the variety of films, particularly American produced films, and they always went back. The visibly attractive and glamorous Hollywood movies often depicted the success of the underdog over unjust authority. Values of cash over culture were often a theme in the early American films and societies with restricted social mobility, such as those in Europe, could dream of such a triumph. The working class and unemployed could fantasise about wealth, fame and freedom which America as a country was portrayed as offering.

The stars, particularly Hollywood stars, made a huge contribution to attracting vast numbers of people to the cinema. Movie stars were only relatively new during the First World War. However, by 1920 there were a number of actors and actresses that had made a name for themselves worldwide. They included names such as Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks and Charlie Chapman.. Audiences of the era looked to the stars with a great deal of admiration. Mary Pickford for example, did not represent the typical ‘pure’ women of the late 19th Century and early 20th Century. She was often depicted as a modern working women who was in support of women’s suffrage and who moved beyond spheres that so many women only dreamed of doing. She was ‘economically free and morally emancipated’, an inspiration to all women of the time and a reason why so many women went to see her movies. (May 1980 p, 119)

The injection of sound into the movies making industry provided a new incentive for moviegoers in the interwar period. The arrival of sound did not make a significant development until after the World War One. Initially, two different systems were introduced. The first was invented by Lee de Forest and was referred to as the ‘audion tube’. It was used to amplify the incoming electromagnetic waves of a radio receiving set and was used as an amplification system for sound motion pictures. De Frost also developed a method whereby sound could be directly recorded on the film in synchronization with the picture. The other system was referred to as the vita phone. This would use a disc recording in synchronisation with the picture. This system was eventually adopted by Warner Brothers and proved a success in the film The Jazz Singer in 1927. (Taylor 1965 p,315) Fox also started to produce sound films on a system very close to that of the one invented by Lee de Frost. By 1930 most movie theatres had converted to sound.

The Great Depression did provide an atmosphere of ‘doom and gloom’. The masses wanted something to ‘uplift’ their lives and to ‘take them away’. (Puttnam 1997 p, 149) British films often reflected the life of the people, rather than offering them any hopes or dreams. They were ‘dreary, depressing and monotonous’. (Puttnam 1997 p,153)

Bibliography

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