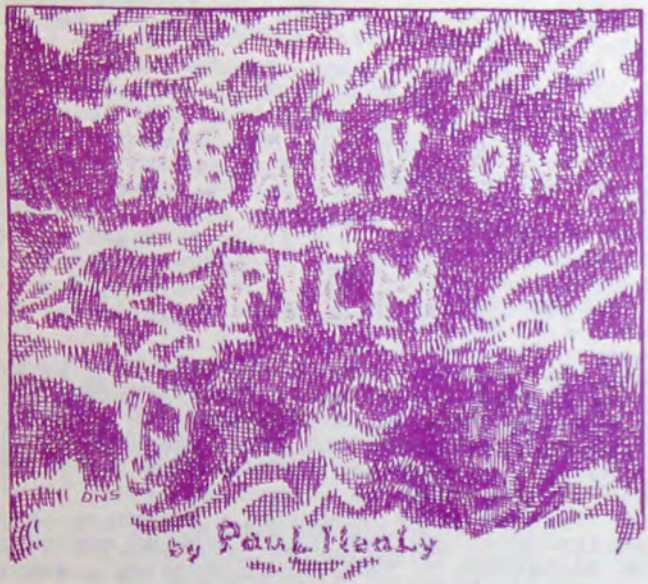

FILMS AT THE SIGN OF THE NEEDLE

Cinema at the Seattle World's Fair (Century 21) is abundant and, in general, quite good, but anyone who expects the theme of the exposition to be carried out in the films he sees is going to be sadly disappointed. Unlike the New York fair in '39 there are no technical advances on display, with the possible exception of the Boeing Spacearium in the United States Science Exhibit.

Not that main science films shown in the building are not good--they are. But when the official guide book of the fair says: "...THE HOUSE OF SCIENCE uses a new motion picture technique. Seven separate films, running simultaneously through seven synchronized projectors, cast seven images on a multiple screen to make a single composite picture..," the ignorance of the writer of the Guide shows through rather badly. In the first place Charles Eames, who designed the film, uses a technique he developed for a film shown by our government at the exhibit in Moscow in 1959. It is not a very impressive technique as anyone who has ever seen a Fox Movietone newsreel will attest. The same sort of thing that Eames does with seven projectors is done in any ordinary theater with just one projector, plus some special lab processing. One always sees four distinct frames in the four corners of the screen, with the title of the newsreel superimposed. A very similar--and actually much more impressive technique--was employed in the theme center of the N.Y. World's Fair, in the Perisphere. There a number of different images--the magical seven,

if memory serves--were projected simultaneously on the dome. Long before that Abel Gance, with his ancestor for Cinerama, used a "Triptych" screen with a central image flanked by two symmetric images on either side. Finally, at the Paris Exposition in 1900 the following eloquent prospectus was handed to all visitors:

THE CINEORAMA

To the right and in front of the Russian Pavilion
Voyages in a ballon across Europe and Africa
Admission, 1 and 2 Francs

Attain your longstanding dream: A voyage in a free balloon or dirigible.

Realize this dream without danger, without fatique, without worry; experience all the impressions and surprises of the ride through space--living panoramas of great cities, then going on through distant lands, landing in the most diverse and picturesque of them, to the North, the South, in Europe and in Africa.

The Cineorama is one of the most original, most unusual and most fashionable of the spectacles of the Fair.

Publicity writers haven't changed very much in over half a century. Attracted by this sales pitch, the public flocked inside, into the basket of a giant balloon, and enjoyed a simulated trip across Europe and Africa. Anyone who visits Disneyland today and goes to the free Bell Telephone show can see a modernized version of the Cineorama--the chief differences being that the projectors are located on the circumference of the circular screen instead of in the center (beneath the basket) as they were in Paris, and that the films shown are in color and are considerably better from a technical standpoint than those at Paris. (One wonders, for example, how the intersection between different images was wiped out, or if it was as apparent--and objectionable--as in today's Cinerama!) Unfortunately Grimoin Sanson's "balloon" was not considered nearly so safe by the police as his advertisement would have led one to believe; they closed down the show a few weeks after it opened.

For actual content, the HOUSE OF SCIENCE begins with an animated sequence, then switches from the very rambling and untidy "House" to images of scientists and their works shown simultaneously on the six separate screens. Many of the images would be familiar to anyone familiar with the Shell film, A Light in Nature (British, 1961). There is an enormous profusion of material, with little identification of persons or objects. Sometimes the script is quite patronizing. Sample: "The scientist has many devices. He writes himself notes. He builds three-dimensional models to actually experience relationships. He creates different images of the same concept

to see it in different ways. He writes papers, he delivers papers, he publishes. And he tries his notions on his friends. It would be impossible to tell from the intensity of this discussion whether they are talking about a questionable cosmology or the proper labeling of a butterfly specimen..."

I, at least, would have liked to know who was talking, and what the subject for discussion was. One is even tempted to wonder if the anonymity is not actually an advanced form of snobbishness.

After this introduction the visitor to the U.S. Scienc Exhibit is herded into the Boeing Spacearium--actually a medium-sized planetarium minus the usual central star projector. In its place is a newly developed 70 mm hemispherical lens, through which is projected onto the spherical dome overhead a trip out through space to the farthest galaxies. It would be nice to report that this is an outstanding, brilliant creation, done with taste and imagination. Unfortunately, the truth is just about the opposite. The stars are streaks, not tiny bright dots; the planets, without exception, appear to be made of nearly congealed mush, and although this appearance may be justifiable in the case of Venus and Saturn, one wonders what can possibly justify presenting this kind of view of Mars and Mercury. Another inconsistency is that one passes Mercury and Venus on the return journey. Since these are inner planets it seems most unlikely that a spaceship back from "deep space" would be coming home that way. Anyone much impressed by this show would do well to visit Morrison Planetarium in San Francisco's Golden Gate Park the next time The Moon: Man's Greatest Adventure is presented. His journey will be much more satisfactory.

The most interesting thing about the Spacearium show is the projection system, and the method used to make the film. Since it was probably photographed from flat drawings and yet projected on a hemispherical screen one wonders precisely what the drawings were like--for they certainly could not in any way have resembled the projected image. It is clearly a technique which requires further development to be fully satisfactory.

The Science Theater,also housed in the U.S. Science building, is located roughly below the House of Science. There are shows in it daily, from 4 to 8 PM in a continuing cycle, repeating after about two weeks. But it is not on the main route through the building, and the only way to find out what is showing is to go to the door of the theater--not even the official information booth of the Fair can tell you, on any given day, what is being shown. Once the theater has been located one may see any of 201 different scientific films, from Arctic Jungle of Canada and Arnhem Land of the Australians to The Vibrating Larynx of the Netherlands and Vie D'un Plasmode from France. Some of the films, like the excellent Shell subject, A Light in Nature are clearly new and important.

Others, such as the Australian Arnhem Land are well-done travelogues, though scarcely new, but still well worth viewing. Still others, such as McGraw-Hill's Flow of Life, are highly specialized films (this one for medical students) with little to recommend them to the student and nothing to offer to the general viewer. One wonders what criteria (if any) were used to select these films --and why, if they were worth showing at all, they were not worth at least a minimum of publicity, if only on the Fair grounds.

Perhaps the most exciting film in the Science Building is the last one a spectator sees before he leaves. Clearly the architect felt that by this time the viewer would be tired of walking, so a moving platform is provided. Just before one steps off this moving floor there is a wide-screen projection of a set of film clips of various scientific subjects--such as growing ice crystals, dividing cells, and sun prominences. Two projectors cast bright images over a much dimmer (and larger) image from a third projector. With only musical accompaniment, this set of films was the most impressive at the Fair.

Many other buildings offered one or more film showings, some in small auditoriums, others on small television-size screens using back projection. For the most part they were competently done, but were certainly not outstanding. The general idea behind most exhibits, including all those using films, was that Century 21 will be merely an extension of Century 20. Perhaps it will, but it would have been nice to have speculated about something at least a little bit different.

(These remarks were presented in part by Paul Healy at the August 31 meeting of the Little Men)

AT THE SIGN OF THE SHELL

A Light in Nature (British Shell, Produced by Stuart Legg)

Unseen Enemies (British Shell, in cooperation with the World Health Organization; Produced by Stuart Legg)

Story in the Rocks (Royal Dutch Shell, by Bert Haanstra)

It is no surprise to find these new Shell films outstanding examples of modern documentary. For many years Shell's film group, including some of the best film makers from the old Crown Film Unit, has been turning out documentaries which should be used as models by other companies and governments--but which obviously aren't.

A Light in Nature draws its title from a remark of Francis Bacon: "If a man could succeed, not in striking out some particular invention, but in kindling a light in nature, in ringing a bell to call other wits together, he would disclose all that is most secret and hidden in the world." Although in part the film seems

to be an advertisement for The Royal Society, it nevertheless makes its point with clarity and force. The film leaps across the world--from the bevatron in Berkeley (one look at the clothing of the scientists manning the control panel would tell you that this equipment was in California, and indeed couldn't be anywhere else!) to rocket firings in Antarctica, from the images of a cell dividing to color photographs of the nebulae. In many ways this film gives a better picture of "The House of Science" than the Eames film of that title--and the commentary is never written down to the average audience, but instead is correct and usually illuminating. Of course this is not a film which Shell cameramen went out and shot--credit is given to 29 organizations at the end for permission to use material. As a result the color is sometimes not well matched, but this is a very minor quibble indeed in consideration of the over-all excellence of this production. A more serious criticism is that at least two or three viewings of this film are essential if the content is to be fully grasped--not an easy requirement to meet. Those who are able to do so will find the effort rewarding.

Unseen Enemies is a companion film to The Rival World, and is equally impressive. It details the great progress that has been made in stamping out certain diseases in some countries, and indicates the magnitude of the task ahead. The shots of diseased human beings are frank and explicit, and the film is not for the squeamish.

The Story in the Rocks is plainly a classroom film, made by Shell as a public service. As such, it would certainly not be worth a review or comment in this column if it in any way resembled the average American classroom film. Instead, it is a pleasure to look at the images--and listen to the sound track. The film is simply an introduction to paleontology, showing what fossils are, how they are formed, and what man has learned from them. Photography and editing technique are splendid, the scientific content has clearly been checked for accuracy, and the language, while simple, does not insult anyone's intelligence. Plainly, this film was made by a talented director with an adequate budget.