SEX IN THE MOVIES

"Plainly meant to shock," charges this noted film critic as he speaks out against Hollywood's violations of its own code of taste

BY BOSLEY CROWTHER

Our movies are becoming more blatantly obsessed with sex. Ten years ago it was unthinkable for a Hollywood picture to show a couple in bed together—even a husband and wife, since this violated an unwritten taboo of the industry's self-regulating Production Code. Today it is not surprising to see two people embracing, in varying stages of deshabille. The change has been accompanied by such raw advertising for some films that even a few of us tough newspaper critics have been offended and have complained.

As motion picture critic of *The New York Times* and as one who has watched American movies from the "silent" days, I can truthfully say I have never seen them so unnecessarily loaded with stuff that is plainly meant to shock.

I have communicated directly with some of the people who have made some of the above-named films and have asked them their reasons for including specific scenes.

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I asked Alfred Hitchcock how he justified introducing *Psycho* with that blunt assignation scene. His retort: "How do *you* critically justify that equally bold introduction to *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*?"

He referred to a close-up of a nude couple which opens the "new wave" French film that won the New York Film Critics award as the best 1960 foreign-language movie.

"I put that scene in *Psycho* for the same reason," Hitchcock said. "I wanted to visualize as clearly as possible the desire and desperation of my heroine. It wouldn't have carried much impact if I had showed them holding hands in a cocktail lounge. Now it is clear that this girl will steal, do anything, for her man."

Hitchcock justified the shattering violence of a subsequent scene wherein the girl is brutally slain in a shower by an unseen assailant. "I wanted to establish what a vicious creature this unseen menace is, so the audience will be trembling with apprehension when another girl is exposed to the same peril," he said.

The motivations, in these instances, do bear the stamp of artistry, even though the measures seemed erotic and extreme.

Director Delbert Mann used similar reasoning in defending the bedroom scene at the beginning of *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs.*

"We found (this) scene necessary to dramatize the conflict between our principals quickly . . . to paint the picture of a good marriage worth saving. . . . It is definitely about the physical side of marriage. Does this make it wrong or coarse? Sex, when approached honestly and properly, is all beauty and warmth.

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These are two decent people involved in a factor of utmost importance to their marriage."

My reply is that the honesty and importance of an act do not justify its exhibition in a movie to be seen by millions of adults and children.

IT IS NO SECRET that in recent years Hollywood producers have felt there was need for "liberalizing" the Production Code. (Producers voluntarily submit their pictures for approval to the Code's administrator, Geoffrey Shurlock, before they show them to the public.) When the Code was first adopted in 1930, it contained prohibitions against scenes of drug traffic, homosexuality, prostitution, miscegenation and such words as "Gawd" or "hell." It gave its administrators latitude—which they lavishly used—in deciding what was vulgar, indecent, obscene and "likely to lower moral standards."

In 1934 the producers agreed that any who violated the Code and released a film without approval would be subject to a $25,000 fine.

After World War II a number of independent producers began to question the strictures of the Code. Otto Preminger made *The Moon Is Blue*, which did not receive a Code seal because in it a young lady fearlessly proclaimed that she was "a virgin" and was candid about her intention to use her virtue to snag a wealthy husband. Preminger refused to change his picture, and it was released by United Artists, which resigned (for a year) from the producers' organization rather than pay the fine. The picture was successful, even without the seal. It was also generally regarded as harmless.

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This was the beginning of the Code's erosion. Slowly, without public notice, many of its more rigid strictures were relaxed. More candor about sex was permitted; the ban on scenes of drug traffic was withdrawn; "hell" and "Gawd" crept into pictures; the $25,000 fine was dropped. Prostitution, miscegenation and even homosexuality have occurred in films with Code seals. Still, there are producers who reason that the Code should be further "liberalized."

The draining competition of TV since World War II has forced movie producers to seek extraordinary ways of trying to pull the customers into the theaters—such as wide screens, "spectacle" movies and the production of bolder stories.

The producers' rationalizations for handling daring themes make some sense. They note TV is free to employ violence and morbid suggestion in ways forbidden to movies. There have even been scenes eliminated from films, to comply with Code requirements, that have been reinserted in the same pictures when these were later shown on TV. A notable case: the French film, *Devil in the Flesh*. A bedroom scene cut when it was shown in movie theaters in major American cities was replaced (even with dubbed English dialogue, to make it more literal) when the film was recently on TV.

Producers ask: "Why should greater freedom be permitted a competitive medium that goes right into the home?" Also, they claim, present-day audiences—even children and teenagers—know more about life than many adults realize. They say atomic-age audiences want to

face the facts of life and this result in the maturing of our heretofore stultified cinema. The recent run of pictures dealing with adultery, prostitution and dope addiction has been defended as merely reflecting conditions that exist in our complex and not always nice society. Such facts are tolerated on the legitimate stage. Why shouldn't they be accepted on the artistically equal screen?

No reasonable critic would ask movie-makers to refrain from facing life squarely or treating its dramatic issues directly. What I object to is the use of material chosen mainly because it has to do with sex, and presented to play up titillating details. Cheap commercialism cannot be excused on the grounds of freedom and an adult attitude. I feel many of the recent questionable films have tried to do exactly that.

But reckless movie-makers are headed for trouble. Objections have been voiced by clergymen, legislators and parent-teacher groups. A committee of Roman Catholic bishops, speaking with the authority of their church, has called for "an unmistakable national protest" against the production and exhibition of what they term "immoral" films. Their attack has been ringingly seconded by Dr. Daniel Poling, editor of the widely circulated Protestant *Christian Herald*. In a recent editorial, Dr. Poling wrote:

"It is high time . . . men and women of good will without regard to faith get together in a positive program in support of the everyday decencies of American life and against Hollywood's steadily growing output of objectionable films."

These are voices which the movie

producers cannot afford to ignore, for the clergy can stimulate pressure on legislatures for film censorship and classification bills. It was the outcry of clergy against a wave of "immoral" films in 1930 that was largely responsible for the industry's adoption of the Production Code. Clergymen in certain communities have frequently been able to dissuade theater operators from showing dubious films.

More likely to discourage producers from continuing to further extremes is their own hard-headed calculation of the eventual bad effects of "too much sex." They realize the public gets bored with unimaginative and unexciting repetitions of pictures on single-track themes.

Already a few of the more banal sex films of the past year—such as the promiscuity-loaded *All the Fine Young Cannibals* starring the usually popular Robert Wagner and Natalie Wood—have flopped simply because they lacked real dramatic substance. Successful films, like interesting people, must have attractive aspects other than sex. As one movie executive put it privately the other day: "This business of making sexy pictures can only go *so* far. After we've run through adultery and a few of these other things, what are we going to do for an encore?" A good question! What, indeed?

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