

MOVIES AND MORALS

ORMONDE



IN RECENT YEARS there has been an astounding increase in motion pictures that would formerly have been called "immoral" in the conventional sense of license in sexual depiction.

Long before this modern trend, one could see spicy pictures in the Penny Arcades to satisfy "peeping Tom" impulses. But one no longer needs to peep, for the whole business is spread before us publicly on the wide screen.

It is difficult to know what to make of this trend. There has been much controversy over it. Before judging it, we might consider how the picture makers behaved in the past with respect to "morality." But let us use the word in a wider sense, to denote general ethical standards.

A good deal of sex and violence was expressed implicitly or explicitly in films from the earliest days. A patina of "morality," however, made them acceptable. There has been a plethora of sensuality in the Biblical epics—many of them were treated like "The Life of Fanny Hill" with a Christmas card tucked in the last page. As long as God became angry in the last reel, all was well.

Some of these epics, like "The Ten Commandments," received widespread endorsement from the clergy. What seems to distress them about today's films is that after the orgy there is no thunder and lightning. The chief moral of the semi-Biblical epic, "Ben Hur," seems to be that Roman chariot races are exciting. We could enjoy being Romans and still piously wind up as Christians.

The treatment of Christ and early Christianity in films is interesting. We know when Christ is around, because he is always accompanied by a chorus of angels. But the people of those days had no chorus of angels to tell them that—otherwise Christ would have been unanimously acclaimed as the Messiah. Without such props, how much more perceptive are we?

Cinematic Christians are nearly always depicted as noble and forbearing people, whereas a lot of them were fanatical and intolerant. Romans were usually shown as uncomprehending brutes, whereas they were the most civilised people of those days. But the Romans are not around today to protest, whereas Christian churches are very much around to guard this theme. Just once, I should like to see the treatment of ancient Rome and early Christians according to Gibbon—who after all knew something of the subject—wherein the Romans were the heroes and the Christians the vil-

lains. Only once, mind, then we can go back to the chorus of angels.

Western films are another interesting study in morality. A typical Western plot is as follows. A "good guy" is harassed by a "bad guy" but does not respond violently. His wife and family bear in pained bewilderment his indisposition to kill. Eventually the bad guy behaves so badly that our hero finally shoots him dead. At last he has overcome his reluctance to kill, his soul is saved, and there is rejoicing in church. Seldom if ever are there moralistic objections to this theme.

Motion pictures are known to be a release, an escape from daily cares, a vicarious living out of dreams, an entertainment. Therefore, I suppose, we should not judge them too severely, nor expect too much of them. Although a strong, realistic film is produced once in a while, that is not the chief aim of the industry.

One potentially fruitful theme, the experiences of people during the depression of the 1930s, has hardly been tapped at all in the pictures. During those hard days, the kind of film that dealt with the depression was generally on the optimistic side—"we shall pull out of it if we work hard and have faith." Since we did not pull out of it that way, the reality is difficult for us to face.

One outstanding film on the depression was "The Grapes of Wrath"—but this dealt with a special case, the "Okie" migrants who were hit by disaster and depression. Most viewers could feel sympathetic, but would not identify themselves with the film characters. I do not know of any motion picture that has dealt with an ordinary Joe Smith who came home some time during 1931 and said "I have lost my job." That would be too un-entertaining for too many people!

Apparently it is more entertaining to see fantasies of unlimited power, money and sex realised, as in the James Bond series. The insidious thing about the violence and killing in such pictures is that it is condoned because it has the sanction of "the Organisation." Old-fashioned film morality at least held the individual responsible for his sins.

Surely it is the preferences of the people that determine what kind of motion pictures we get, and not so much the films that determine the behaviour of people. Films are often blamed for stimulating much of the immorality, license and violence of today. But more likely it is the changing mores of the times that influence the kind of pictures being offered.

What does this tell us about our times? Isn't it one more sign of the decadence of modern civilisation? Or

is it, as some contend, as new liberation, a shaking off of hypocrisy, a trend toward individual maturity? Is it here to stay, or is it a passing fad? Is it an unrelated phenomenon, or does it say something about social trends in general? Many say in defense of sensual films that it is better to make love than to make war. No doubt—but on the wide screen?

Those concerned with the progress of the social order cannot but regard with apprehension any further trend in this direction. Censorship of films is no answer. If the spate of flagrant films is an expression, though minor, of some malaise in society, we had better probe this matter more deeply.

It often happens in society that people seek freedom bordering on license in one department of life when there are too many troubles and frustrations in other departments. Present-day society places so many constrictions on the individual and so many obstacles in the way of his economic well-being, after so many false promises, that the trend in motion pictures might very well be one response to his bafflement.

If there is anything to this theory, we may take it as one more warning that we had better straighten out our economy. Perhaps in restoring economic balances, other imbalances may be corrected, such as the gross tendencies of the motion picture industry.

SOCIETY IN A STRAITJACKET

"There appears to be a tendency to use people as if they were natural resources."

AT THE Second International Congress of Social Psychiatrists held in London from August 4-8, Dr. G. W. Esty, MD, FAAP, of New Jersey, presented a paper on The Psychoeconomics of Human Ecology—a Challenge to the Behavioural Sciences.

"If human ecology pertains to the effects of the environment upon the behaviour and viability of man," he said, "we can observe that society appears to be sick."

"Behavioural scientists, including the social psychiatrists, can contribute to man's survival provided they direct their efforts toward the correction and prevention of those underlying destructive economic forces that contribute to society's illness and survival."

"Superficial expedients such as slum clearance or the building of model cities will but ultimately intensify relative poverty, richness and social disruption, unless there is a significant change in conventional tax systems which are inherently responsible."

Dr. Esty said that in an affluent society this potential for social disruption and self-destruction starts with the family and its child-rearing practices and attitudes. A process of manipulation of the child for the

ends of others commonly begins in infancy, and extends through childhood, schooling, and into the world of business and politics, creating a "thing-centred" society. Escape from such conforming pressures tends to the development of varied deviant psychosocial behaviour. Too often there appeared to be a tendency to use people as though they were natural resources—to be mined, controlled, manufactured and shaped. Both human and natural exploitation brought pollution and human wastage, which may threaten survival.

"Youth has rebelled against this manipulative society, its waste, its hypocrisy, its wars. Youth seeks new values and directions, based upon the worthiness of human beings and the equal right and opportunity for all people to survive. Let us then involve youth with the most basic and almost forgotten 'inheritance of the past'—the land, from which we spring and have our being."

Agrarian land reform, he said, is now common and has received increasing world-wide attention. However, little effort has been directed to urban land reform, where taxation has been viewed as a fiscal matter only, without reference to its psychological impact upon human

behaviour and motivation.

"Can cities survive? Can the process of city decay, with its social pollution, be reversed? Economists, politicians, and city planners responsible for the formulation of laws, are seldom mindful of the psychology of human behaviour. As a result tax systems tend to be negatively motivated and are therefore avoided or violated, leading to further decay."

An incentive tax system was described "which positively motivates human response and permits the solution of ecological problems." Based upon the fact that land values of sites or locations are determined by the demand of a given population, the speaker urged that a graded tax be placed upon such community created values, and that taxes upon improvements of production, currently penalizing human effort and incentives, be removed. Benefits to the economy, the elimination of slums, and the conservation of natural resources and land were demonstrated.

Dr. Esty urged that behavioural scientists and others familiar with the importance that incentives and motivations play in human affairs, begin to involve themselves with the leadership of governments and with the concerned youth leadership as well, to counsel with them on the psychoeconomics of taxation, welfare and aid programmes as they affect human dignity, health and survival.