

If It's Good Box Office It's Decent--New Hollywood Code?

BY PHILIP K. SCHEUER

• The lid's off.

That's the word around Hollywood. This goes not only for sex morality but for other moralities as well—like respect for the established institutions of government.

Some reasons given: (1) Families pay lip service to family pictures but seldom enough admissions at the box office to pay off; (2) the success of frank foreign imports and even the nudies ground out at home; (3) the same old competition with television, sports, etc.; (4) the general climate of defiance of convention in the mediums of art and communications, including plays, novels, periodicals and even TV itself, and (5) most of all, dollars and cents.

A good deal that is happening is happening because the edges between artistry and pornography are constantly growing more blurred; or, if you will, deadened (as we become more shock proof). Example: A couple of weeks ago the Hollywood vice detail confiscated "Scorpio Rising," a film made by Kenneth Anger, as "lewd in nature." A few days later, the Ford Foundation named Kenneth Anger as one of "12 American creative film makers who will receive grants totaling \$118,500."

Liberties Intensified

One thing, as they say, leads to another—as in cancer. The liberties or licenses accepted today in "Under the Yum Yum Tree," "Irma la Douce," "The Balcony," "Tom Jones" and "Dr. Strangelove" will be reflected and intensified in the even more calculated risks the producers are undertaking for tomorrow. Consider "Fanny Hill" and "A House Is Not a Home" (prostitution, past and near-present), "The Outrage" ("intellectualized" rape, an outgrowth of "Rashomon"), "The Carpetbaggers" (Hollywood as a sinkhole of sex and opportunism), "The Collector" (a camera-bug voyeur keeps a young woman prisoner), and "Lady in a Cage" (just what it says); "The Loved One" (necrophilia), and, perhaps, even "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" (sc-

cial decay depicted in a college town).

You notice that even I write "perhaps." "Virginia Woolf" is a powerful drama, widely acclaimed as great. Much will depend on the form in which it reaches the screen—as with the others named. Critically speaking, in each case the viewer will then have to balance the aesthetics against whatever moral attitude prevails in 1964-65. Or is the word readjust—since the edges by then will have become still more blurred?

Original Production Code

I have been glancing over the original Production Code, published over the 1930-49 period by the Motion Picture Assn. of America, Inc. Here are some highlights:

"The sympathy of the audience shall never be thrown to the side of crime, wrong-doing, evil or sin (enunciated among 'general principles')." "Methods of crime should not be explicitly presented." "The illegal drug traffic must not be portrayed in such a way as to stimulate curiosity concerning the use of, or traffic in, such drugs; nor shall scenes be approved which show the use of illegal drugs, or their effects, in detail." "The sanctity of the institution of marriage and the home shall be upheld. Pictures shall not infer that low forms of sex relationship are the accepted or common thing." "Miscegenation is forbidden." "Sex perversion or any inference of it is forbidden."

And so on through vulgarity, child-birth, sex hygiene, profanity, costume, dances, etc., etc. Even "the use of liquor" in American life, when not required by the plot or for proper characterization, was verboten.

We've come a long way since then—unquestionably in the interests of drama and realism, since art is the mirror of life. And in 1956 the MPAA, recognizing that the world does move, revised its Production Code.

Its director since 1954—a member of the MPAA since 1932—is Geoffrey

Shurlock. As an employee of the motion-picture industry, he is in a sense its authorized spokesman. I went out to the posh MPAAs offices to hear what he had to say about all these contradictory goings-on.

Shurlock made it plain, as he has for years, that he is in the employ of the studios. "I do not pass aesthetic judgment," he said. "Otherwise I would get into arguments in a field in which I am not competent."

"The only people I know who are equipped to be a moral gauge are the Catholic Legion of Decency—and we stand better with them, or as well as we ever have, in our lives. Of recent pictures, 85% are in the A or unobjectionable category, only 15% objectionable in part."

Shurlock insisted that the source of a film is less important "than what kind of film comes out of this. We do very little cutting on a finished picture—but we give them plenty of argument on scripts! Take 'Lolita'—as bawdy a book as you could get. Yet almost everybody spoke quite respectfully of the picture Stanley Kubrick got out of it."

"What's wrong"—almost defensively—"with taking bawdy material if you come out with a fine picture?"

"Isn't it true," I asked—topsy-turvy contradiction again!—"Isn't it true that you withheld a code seal from 'Tom Jones' till the Legion gave it an A-4 (not objectionable for some age groups) rating?"

Asked for Seal, Got One

"Yes," he admitted. "But it just so happened that United Artists didn't know they had a hit and were thinking of releasing it through Lopert, their 'art house' subsidiary. Therefore they didn't ask us for a seal. But about the same time the Legion gave it an A-4 rating the picture started to take fire at the box office. United Artists figured they had a sleeper, asked us for a seal and got one."

The Production Code, Shurlock readily agreed, has been relaxed. He showed me the revised, December, 1956, issue. The definition of taboos is filled with ifs, and suggestions that this or that one should be "discouraged"—like the subject of abortion. The phrase which continually pops up, in reference to any treatment, is "care, discretion and restraint." "Look," Shurlock protested, "We still forbid 'complete nudity'—and we mean exactly that."

He again pointed out that his department has no jurisdiction over foreign-made movies that are not released through one of the nine major companies (non-members, for instance include Joe Levine-Embassy, Walter Reade-Sterling and AIP). As for the domestic brand of nudie and sex quickies, "They don't come anywhere near us. They don't need us."

Only Prosecution Grounds

About the only grounds left for prosecution today, Shurlock declared, are against pure (save the mark!) obscenity—and that's usually a matter for the police and the courts. And even here, he reminded me, there is little consistency any more: The New York State Board of Regents demanded the elimination of two sex-sequences from the Danish "A Stranger Knocks" (they were later overruled), but a few weeks later they passed, with nary a cut, Ingmar Bergman's much more perverse "The Silence."

So where is it all going to lead?

"For 20 years," Shurlock replied soberly, "we have had to look toward stage plays and novels as a source of material—and we're bound to follow the trend in order to stay in business. If we can come out as well as we did with a Billy Wilder 'Irma la Douce,' we have no conflict."

"But movies are not going to be able to escape the general contagion."

Or as a cynical Sunday editor called after me when I left for the MPAA—"Ask 'em what's left to be shown on the screen that the code is not going to object to."