

1960s films show history of 'obscene'

Vilgot Sjöman's 'Curious' films explore sexuality, gender and activism

By Aaron Shakra
Pulse Editor

Some forms of "obscenity" are taken for granted these days in America. Consider violent imagery — it is so prevalent that audiences have become desensitized to its power. But still the greatest controversy over obscenity in the media exists when it comes to portrayal of the naked human form, and just what exactly can and cannot be shown.

FORGOTTEN FILMS

Consider the obviously ironic "covering" of the Spirit of Justice statue,

which has one breast exposed. The verdict is out as to whether Attorney General John Ashcroft — who has publicly spoken in front of the statue numerous times — made the request himself; the only reasoning given to the press was that it was done for "aesthetic" reasons.

This incident is, of course, only a distant second to another recent breast controversy in America that need not be mentioned.

Although mainstream offerings may disguise this fact today, film has long been a battleground for debate over standards of what can and can't be shown of the body. In 1967, Swedish writer/director Vilgot Sjöman's film "Jag är nyfiken - en film i gult," or "I Am Curious (Yellow)" was one historical example of "obscenity."

Sjöman was given complete freedom by his studio to make the film. The studio essentially gave him a budget and reels of black and white film to shoot with — there were no other limitations. "I Am Curious" had no script, and the final product only loosely resembles a plot.

Instead, the film focuses on 20-year-old Lena Nyman, whose curiosity is centered around her relationship with men (and later, women), self-exploration, acceptance and political activism. A mantra of "Non-cooperation, non-violence, sabotage, non-violent defense and civil disobedience" is repeated throughout the film.

The lines between reality and film are blurred indistinguishably. "Curious" is a film that is self-aware — quite frequently, the audience is made aware a film is being made. The film opens with Lena and the director (played by himself) "casting" the role of Magnus, with whom Lena wants to have a love scene. This, of course, reveals events that will later unfold.

While this might seem like a gimmick, especially considering pop or postmodern cinema in the 1990s, the telescoping reality of "Curious" is quite effective. When the film begins to take itself too seriously, it suddenly stops to reveal Sjöman and crew behind the

scenes, making the moments.

Early in the film, Lena, on an assignment from Sjöman, asks Swedish citizens: "Does Sweden have a class system?" The answers vary from insightful to disinterested to "Undress them and they're all alike. Dress them, and you have a class system." Swedish politicians discuss class issues, and the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. discusses nonviolence — although whether his appearance was culled from stock footage or shot specifically for this film is unclear.

"I Am Curious" is especially candid in its portrayal of sex, and Lena's perspective is not understated. In her room she has a filing cabinet labeled "M" for men, and she tells her boyfriend Börje that she has slept with 23 men — adding that the first 19 were uninteresting. Lena is sexually promiscuous, but so is Börje, who is linked to two other women throughout the course of the film.

If it only featured discussion about sex, the film perhaps would have not been so controversial. It was not allowed to be shown in the United States, however, and was seized by customs. American producer Barney Rosset used it to fight obscenity laws in the courts. Three parts of the film were especially scrutinized: The extensive male (in addition to female) full-frontal nudity, a scene in which Lena shoots a gun at her boyfriend, Börje, and another in which she caresses his penis.

By jury, "Curious" was determined obscene. However, the ruling was appealed and the film was eventually allowed to be shown. More information about the case is available in Edward Degrazia's book "Banned Films."

Whether this is a film about women's rights is questionable. If Lena were only promiscuous, the answer would be a clear "no," however she is more than a one-dimensional character. It would be more accurate to say that she is promiscuous about everything she confronts in her life. It would also be more accurate to say that the film is about equal rights for everyone, everywhere, and through the lens of the lead character, these aims are often radical. Toward the end of the film, she posts a sign reading "Message to humanity: Down with all privileged classes of the world."

Shooting for "I Am Curious" commenced in the summer of 1966, but by the time Sjöman had finished editing, he wasn't happy with the result. He went back and asked his studio for more money and film, which his studio again granted. The final result was two films, or more accurately, two versions of the same film. The "blue" version builds upon the loose narrative and political themes of "yellow" and explores religion and homosexuality.

"I Am Curious (Yellow)" and "I Am Curious (Blue)" are both available on DVD at Flicks & Pics, located at 2777 Friendly St.

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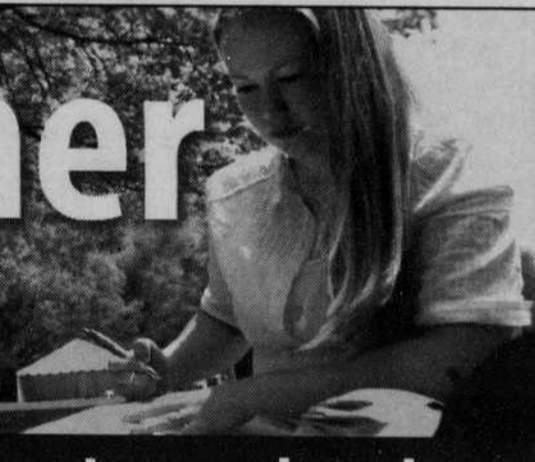
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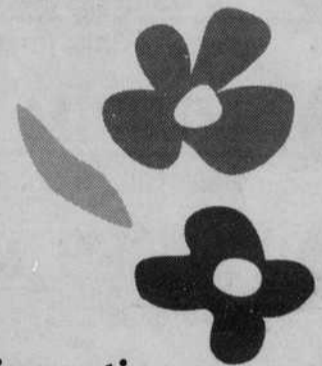
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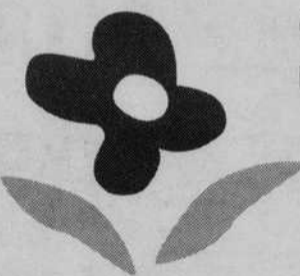
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