

THE MENACE OF IMMORAL MOVIES

Film producers are trapped
by a dirt-for-dollars
philosophy, says this best-selling
author, and it's time
they learned it's a road to ruin

By SLOAN WILSON



Editors' Note: Sloan Wilson, who wrote "The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit" and whose latest novel is "A Sense of Values," joins a lengthening list of outstanding writers—Billy Graham, Pearl Buck, Harry Golden, Willy Ley, Philip Wylie—who have contributed to making FAMILY

WEEKLY a more provocative and informative magazine for its readers. His analysis of movie-makers' preoccupation with sex, perversion, and violence may cause some disagreements, particularly since his own popular novel, "A Summer Place," became a highly controversial movie. His opinions, however, are presented as a literate man's reaction to a growing trend in our culture.

IT'S HARD TO GO to a movie theater these days without wondering what in the world is happening to American motion pictures—and foreign films, too, for that matter. The most sordid portrayals of adultery, psychopathic crime, and violence of almost every description are blatantly depicted. They are bad enough to make many parents hesitate to allow their children to attend.

The reason for the rash of tawdry movies is not a mysterious decline in the taste of the American public, nor even in that of the producers. Hollywood is full of highly skilled men who long to make genuinely good movies, and who are convinced that an ample audience exists for them. The difficulty is that Hollywood during the past 10 years has been on the edge of financial panic. The makers of movies tend to resort to dirt when they're afraid they can't make a living otherwise.

It is an ironic fact that most films which are advertised as "daring" only reflect the financial fears of the producers, who are seeking "insurance" at the box office. Sensational scenes are cheap to produce, and they can be counted upon to draw some kind of a crowd. The producer who has borrowed millions of dollars to make a movie and who has seen good films fail financially has to be brave to withstand the temptation of pay dirt.

Yes, the producers have financial troubles—but does that mean that the American public has to settle for trash at their neighborhood movie house? Is censorship necessary?

Censorship has been tried often and in many forms, and is still being tried. It never really works. Dirt, of course, is not just certain story themes, but in the way such themes are treated, and treatment apparently is impossible to regulate by law. If a code were written to forbid films which dealt with sexuality, crime, or insanity, Shakespeare himself would find it impossible to write good dramas if he were living today.

TO DRAW up a code which restricted Americans to a film diet of dog stories, horse operas, and polite little stories in which nobody ever did anything wrong would be an immoral act in itself. Neither the audience nor the artist should be blindfolded by laws of censorship; they simply should be protected from those who wish to pervert the great spectacle of life into a dirty little tent show.

Of course, there always will have to be some censorship to prevent outright obscenity, but it is difficult to figure out what should be done beyond that. If we are going to try to prevent immorality in films, we are going to have to agree on some sort of definition of it, and that is never easy.

My own conviction is that anything is immoral if it subtracts from the dignity of the individual

or of humanity as a whole, and that anything is moral if it adds to the fundamental dignity of mankind. A film which moves an audience to understanding and compassion for human weaknesses seems to me to be moral.

From all this, I conclude that more censorship is not the answer to the present flood of tawdry motion pictures. What is the answer? Probably there is no easy, over-all solution. Just as there always have been some scurrilous books and magazines, which we tolerate for the sake of a free press, there always will be some scurrilous movies. The hope is not that such films will disappear entirely, but that more good dramas will be made to replace them in most local theaters.

Fortunately, Hollywood has become more prosperous and less panic-stricken in the last two years. As the movie makers regain their confidence, they may feel that they have to resort less to the box-office "insurance" of dirt and may be emboldened to take the great risk inherent in the job of making genuinely good movies.

WHAT CAN INDIVIDUALS do to help create conditions in which more good films will be made? To the extent that any individual can do anything to affect so large an enterprise as the motion-picture industry, it would help if people supported good films. All too many people who complain about the lack of good movies don't go to see the really fine ones.

Eventually, movie makers will realize that movies still have a bright future and are not going to be relegated to the position of cheap side shows. There is a big enough audience in America for good films to justify the cost of producing them. There are plenty of producers, directors, actors, and writers who want nothing more than to recover their self-respect by making movies of lasting value. Because these two facts are true, it can only be a question of time before conditions are created that will bring us more good movies.

COVER:

The bright-feathered parakeets in Jacques Lowe's photo make a colorful valentine for our two human "lovebirds." They also make popular pets, as you'll see on p. 8.

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