



Shirley MacLaine and Jack Lemmon in scene from "The Apartment."

Adult Films on TV-Why and How

Films that just a few short years ago were shocking movie-goers and causing various groups to urge strong age-restrictions at the box office will this year be among the major offerings of all three TV networks.

"Tom Jones," "The Apartment," "Splendor in the Grass," "The Collector," "The Pumpkin Eater," "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" — these and other films containing subject matter and treatments that many people were certain would not be seen on television for many years to come — will be featured this season on the increasingly popular network movies.

Even a "Condemned" rating from the national Catholic film office — once considered an effective deterrent to the sale of a movie to television — will not prevent the showing of "Never on Sunday" on NBC-TV's Saturday night movie, Sept. 30.

What has made the transfer of such films from the downtown theater screen to the living-room screen so swift? What effect will they have on future TV fare? And what is the reaction of groups like the Catholic film office?

Supply and Demand
The answer to the first question is a familiar one: supply and demand. Compared to the simple-minded situation comedies like "Green Acres" and "It's About Time," the relatively better stories and acting provided by movies has created an appeal to a much broader audience. Four out of five of the network movies were in the top ratings last season, and "The Bridge on the River Kwai" had an estimated audience of 71 million — believed to be the biggest audience ever for any TV program.

The demand is there, but the supply is running out, at least insofar as films that are acceptable for all audiences are concerned. TV, trying to fill an insatiable need rather economically, has been running out of post-1960 films of a "family" nature and has decided to turn to the many "adult" films that have been made since 1960.

But behind the simple arithmetic of supply and demand, another factor enters the TV picture: namely, that TV may be evolving into a "mature" medium faster than most people thought likely. Without risking millions of dollars in creating TV series or specials with provocative, controversial subject matter, the networks can "probe" the viewers' acceptance or rejection of such programming with movies like "The Apartment."

Although many people will be expecting only a rousing Jack Lemmon-Shirley MacLaine comedy when they turn it on, they will find it also has tragic and sardonic comments to make about extramarital sex in its story about a man who moves up the company ladder by lending his "pad" to his boss.

In an article headlined "Pik 'Maturing' TV," the showbusiness weekly "Variety" quoted CBS-TV's program vice president Perry Lafferty as saying: "We must go along with the times. Taboos intellectually and physically are breaking down, and TV must go along with this. If we try to use a totally puritan line with a blindfold, we become hopelessly old-fashioned, and the audience will wither away."

TV Standards
This is not to suggest that by the end of this season or by the end of any future season — viewers will have nothing to see but "The Carpenters" and "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" Last season's two most popular TV movies, aside from "Kwai," were "The Robe" and "Lilies of the Field," and as noted by Howard Bell, director of the TV industry's Code Authority: "TV standards will always have to be somewhat tighter than those for the theater. There has to be more control for those exhibiting films in the living room, where control of who sees what is more difficult."

As for the National Catholic Office for Motion Pictures, it offers no real objection to the presentation of "adult" films on television, directing its attention primarily to what steps are taken to inform parents of the movies' content.

"Even though the television medium is looked upon as a home and family medium," said NCOMP executive secretary, Rev. Patrick J. Sullivan, S.J., "it is not unreasonable that certain hours should be for adults. We would be of the opinion that criticism would be most reasonable if adult films were screened before 9 p.m."

But regardless of how much network-television comes to rely on "adult" movies, the national Catholic film office is unlikely to become overly concerned.

For although many of these films are "adult" in that they treat grown-up subjects that are frequently of a sexual nature, by the time the network censors get through with films like "Tom Jones," "Never on Sunday" and "The Apartment," they no longer contain certain elements that gave them a "reputation" when they first were shown in theaters.

More often than not, what gives "adult" films a bad image is not so much the subject matter — or what the film is about — as it is the treatment: the kind of dialogue used, daring boudoir or lovemaking scenes, risqué comedy, nudity, the way a camera lingers on a scene more than might be necessary.

With advertisers investing millions of dollars to win the viewer's attention and, hopefully, good will, the network will not hesitate to cut a scene they think will offend viewers because of costuming, language or what the Catholic film office usually terms "suggestive situations."

Often, scenes or dialogue that might have brought an objection from the film office when the movie was first released theatrically may no longer remain because of cuts that have been made by the networks for time.

"It is possible that the rating we gave is no longer applicable to the given film," said the Rev. Patrick J. Sullivan, S.J., the film office's executive secretary. He said this is true especially when cuts have been made, but the passage of time may also be a factor.

Old Ratings

Another argument in favor of the old ratings is that parents can not be certain that offensive scenes have been cut; still another maintains that an objectionable rating may have gone to a film's entire morale.

However, as stated by one paper which recently decided to do away with its TV-movie ratings, the "fact that often movies are substantially cut for TV use" and "the fact that . . . the evaluation agency has so altered its approach from the time the films were originally rated" have caused the ratings to lose much of their significance. "We feel the publication of ratings of such doubtful validity would be unjust," the paper said.

The film office itself has never objected to its old ratings being applied to TV showings, aware that "many people are looking for some kind of guidance and information," said Father Sullivan.

Nevertheless, it appears that the film office does not give much weight to a film's emotional impact when seen on television as opposed to the effect it might have in a movie theater.

"It is not simply the commercial and domestic interruptions that weaken the film's effectiveness," the film office said in its "Catholic Film Newsletter." "Much of the loss is rather due to the indefinite quality of the small image, even when technicians provide perfect contrast in their transmission."

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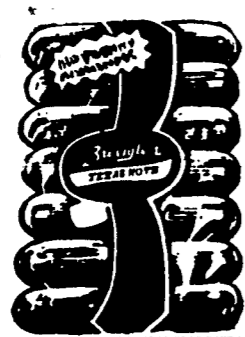
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