

*How to judge the morality
of motion pictures
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HOW TO JUDGE THE MORALITY OF MOTION PICTURES

A Popular Guide to Right Standards
in Motion Picture Entertainment, Au-
thorized by the Episcopal Committee
on Motion Pictures for the Legion of
Decency



NATIONAL CATHOLIC WELFARE CONFERENCE

1312 Massachusetts Avenue
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PLEDGE OF THE LEGION OF DECENCY

"All pastors of souls will undertake to obtain each year from their people a pledge similar to the one already alluded to, which is given by their American brothers, and in which they promise to stay away from motion picture plays offensive to truth and Christian morality."—*From Pope Pius XI's Encyclical on Motion Pictures.*

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

✚ CONDEMN indecent and immoral motion pictures, and those which glorify crime or criminals.
✚ PROMISE to do all that I can to strengthen public opinion against the production of indecent and immoral films, and to unite with all who protest against them.
✚ ACKNOWLEDGE my obligation to form a right conscience about pictures that are dangerous to my moral life. As a member of the Legion of Decency, I pledge myself to remain away from them. I promise, further, to stay away altogether from places of amusement which show them as a matter of policy.

Name

Parish

Diocese

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MORAL SIGNIFICANCE

It is generally recognized that entertainment is either helpful or harmful. A clear distinction must, therefore, be made between

- (a) entertainment which tends to elevate or to relax men and women physically or mentally tired with the duties and occupations of every day life, and
- (b) entertainment which tends to lower their ideals and moral standards of life.

The right kind of entertainment helps to maintain a normal outlook on life. It may go far in keeping a nation sound in mind and in heart. The wrong sort of entertainment, on the other hand, tends to lower moral ideals and to give a wholly false conception of life and its responsibilities.

Motion pictures must be judged not only as entertainment but also as an influence on morals. A screen drama influences morals because it presents ideals of human conduct. If these be true ideals, we have entertainment which ennobles; if they be false, we have entertainment which degrades.

INFLUENCE—GOOD OR BAD

Film stories, as a rule, deal with men and women who are facing some problem in their lives and are trying to solve it. In every screen drama we see human beings in action or we see them reacting to certain influences. But human acts can never be considered apart from morality. The deliberate act of man is either good or bad. Man's purposes are good or bad. Man's passions—love, hatred, desire, abomination, joy, sadness, hope, despair, fear, temerity and anger—fall under the scope of the moral law. Screen characters may lie, steal, commit perjury; they may forgive, suffer, make sacrifices for the sake of right. And even though these characters live only on the screen, even though all they say and do be wholly imaginary, their actions, their desires and their ambitions must be measured by objective and unchanging moral standards.

The films not only show human beings in action, but give a moral color to their acts in such a way as to bring about a definite moral response from the

audience. As one watches the unreeling of a story, his mind, feelings and will consciously or otherwise react. He approves or disapproves of what the characters do; he is moved to sympathy or to antagonism. When leading characters, either by what they say or do, express their attitude towards right and wrong, or when they accept or reject some standard of conduct, those in the audience are very likely to be influenced by them.

It is natural to adopt the ideals of a person who is greatly admired. If this is done, one is likely to approve his conduct. And since an audience may conceive a strong liking for certain characters in a motion picture, it is easily led to sympathize with them and to share their moral convictions.

In brief, then, there are two reasons why a motion picture can powerfully influence personal morality: First, because in dealing with life and conduct it must inevitably present or imply a moral thesis; secondly, because it tends to persuade an audience to accept that thesis. If the thesis be true, the film is an agency for good. If the thesis be false, the film is an evil influence. Obviously, obscene expressions, songs, gestures and actions which are part of otherwise unobjectionable motion pictures exert an evil influence.

PURPOSE OF THE LEGION OF DECENCY

The purpose of the Legion of Decency is to see that motion pictures conform to the accepted and traditional morality upon which the home and civilization are founded.

The Legion of Decency condemns obscenities of every kind in the moving pictures. It condemns salaciousness—any appeal to the lower instincts of an audience, such as might be made by protracted and lustful intimacies between the sexes, by disrobing scenes or by other suggestive sequences. The Legion of Decency is governed by good sound common sense. It is not narrow-minded. While it agrees that the human body is beautiful, it recognizes the serious moral danger to those seeing it exposed on the screen under attractive circumstances. It must condemn presentations introduced merely for suggestive display.

All these are highly important objectives. But the principal aim of the Legion is to discourage the production and patronizing of films which present false moral standards which, in turn, lower traditional morality.

By "traditional standards of morality" is meant such principles of conduct as the following: "Murder is wrong. Stealing is wrong. Perjury is wrong. Honor is due to father and mother." These standards, together with many relating to sex, follow from the code of right and wrong written into the

consciences of men by God Himself. They have been generally known and accepted during all the centuries, not only by Christians, but by Jews, pagans, and by men of no religious affiliations. They are expressed in the Ten Commandments.

EXAMPLES

Many persons who readily admit the existence of these traditional laws find it difficult to obey them, owing to the weakness of human nature. If there were no evasion of the principles laid down by them, neither their validity nor their binding force upon the human conscience would be questioned. A film story making a powerful argument against accepted moral standards could easily persuade such persons to change their convictions about right and wrong.

The following may serve as examples:

Picture "A"

This is a deeply moving triangle story. It is entirely devoid of salacious details, but it proposes the doctrine that when a man's wife is selfish and unsympathetic he is entirely justified in turning to another woman for love and happiness. In short, the film condones and justifies adultery. It does this, not by ethical arguments but by emotional appeal. Deeply stirred by the picture, many of those witnessing it are apt to sympathize with the hero, approve his conduct, and thus change their former convictions. They may be led to believe that under certain circumstances adultery is excusable. Here is a false moral standard, wholly at variance with traditional beliefs.

Picture "B"

A story of young romance. Because of some circumstances—parental objections, let us say, or lack of money—the hero and heroine are forced to postpone marriage indefinitely. They are young; they are persuaded that they cannot live without each other; they refuse to await marriage. Here is a film which by its sympathetic treatment presents most speciously the doctrine that sex experience is but the innocent culmination of love. It preaches that true lovers would be fools to defer it until marriage, and that pre-marital relations in such cases are pardonable. Because the hero is attractive and the heroine beautiful, the audience is inclined to sympathize with them, and even approve what they do. It may be persuaded that deep and tender love excuses sin. Here, again, is a false moral standard, wholly at variance with traditional morality.

Picture "C"

An old-fashioned plot in which the heroine sacrifices her virtue as the price of success in some splendid attempt—to win the opportunity of becoming a great artist, to save her country as a spy, to forward

a brother's professional career, etc., etc. The picture implies that the sacrifice is a noble one, and asks the approval of the audience, which is too often given! Thus the film preaches that a good end justifies evil means, and that sinful conduct can under certain circumstances be justified. This is a false moral doctrine, wholly at variance, not only with the will of God and the teaching of fundamental morality, but with the interests of society in general.

Picture "D"

A "kept-woman" drama which begins with the heroine debating whether or not she will accept an apartment from a married man. Her hesitation arises not from the fact that adultery is a sin against God's law—a factor which the film carefully refrains from noting—but that it is a violation of social standards and conventions. She makes her decision. Society, she assures herself, is contemptible; its conventions are stupid and outworn. She will defy the world. Thus the heroine is depicted as a courageous and attractive rebel. Many in the audience may applaud her independence and despise her critics. Meanwhile they may be learning to believe that in certain cases sin may not really be sin, but merely a justified revolt against social manners, forms or customs. Here is a false moral doctrine, wholly at variance with the fundamental teachings of morality.

Picture "E"

A high-speed farce, revolving around the friendly rivalry between two hearty fellows in their attempts to seduce the heroine, who is shown as the worldly-wise, impertinent and "wise-cracking" type of young woman. The competition between the men—their schemes, their ludicrous pursuit of the heroine, their clumsy advances to her, together with her repeated refusals—is the occasion of much laughter. This film naturally contains many objectionable lines and scenes; but its chief danger lies in the fact that it portrays lust as amusing and seduction as a laughable incident. Obviously, such a film is destructive of true moral values in the minds of an audience.

Picture "F"

A gangster melodrama in which the leading character is presented as a clever and resourceful law-breaker. He is successful financially. He is popular and lives luxuriously. The police, the guardians of the law, are made to appear inefficient and stupid. The "crook" easily outwits them, meanwhile displaying to the audience details of criminal procedure—the opening of safes, clever provisions for escape, the use of firearms, anesthetics, etc. Even though in the end the "crook" is brought to justice, such a film is potentially dangerous to public welfare, since it tends to glorify crime and the criminal and sug-

gests ways of committing crime. It typifies the wrong kind of entertainment.

The case might be summed up as follows:

Traditional moral standards, based on the law of God, teach that certain acts are sinful and that certain acts are virtuous. Many films, however, by their insidious and attractive presentation of false standards, induce their patrons to change their life-long convictions and to believe that, occasionally, at least, certain sins are virtues and certain virtues are sins. All this means moral disaster, for when convictions are perverted, conduct invariably undergoes a change for the worse.

THE PRODUCTION CODE

The Production Code is a detailed and inclusive formula adopted by the principal producers of American motion pictures to regulate the morals of the movies. It is a voluntary system of self-regulation. Its character and purposes are commended by the Legion of Decency.

The following is an outline of its principal provisions:

1. No picture shall be produced in which evil is made to appear attractive and good unattractive.
2. No picture shall be produced in which the sympathy of the audience is thrown on the side of wrongdoing, evil, sin, or against goodness, honor, innocence, purity or honesty.
3. Correct standards of life shall, as far as possible, be presented.
4. Law, human or divine, shall not be ridiculed, nor shall sympathy be created for its violation.
5. Treatment of crime must not make heroes of criminals nor seem to justify their actions.
6. Sympathy of the audience must not be thrown against marriage as an institution.

The Production Code is administered by the Production Code Administration, a board created by the Producers' Association. It is intended to interpret, to apply and to enforce the provisions of the Production Code. Its activities embrace the reading of scripts, consultation with writers and producers and examination of completed motion pictures.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF MOTION PICTURES

The Legion of Decency holds that far more than any other form of popular entertainment, the motion pictures have the obligation of not subverting traditional morality by the presentation of films that are degrading. It urges that their immense influence be used rather for the education, recreation and general welfare of the people. The stage and books of fiction, with their helpful or harmful influence, reach many thousands each year. But their number is insignificant when compared with the millions who are influenced by the screen. The drama and books,

moreover, appeal for the greater part to the mature and the educated—that is, to those whose moral convictions are, in a measure, fixed. But motion pictures set patterns of human conduct before all classes. Particularly do they reach the young, who naturally are eager for experience, either personal or vicarious, and whose moral standards may be easily raised or lowered.

In brief, because the motion pictures reach greater numbers and speak with extraordinary persuasiveness to impressionable people, their producers have special moral obligations to the public. They should avoid confusing morals. They should present only correct standards of life.

The charge that the Legion of Decency wants writers to treat only of an unreal, Pollyanna-type world, and that artists are forbidden to touch upon the story of man's frailty, is one advanced, of course, only by persons ignorant of both history and literature. The truth is that sinful acts are acknowledged by Catholics to be legitimate material for books, stage or screen. But they insist—and with special emphasis as far as motion pictures are concerned—that such conduct be not condoned; that evil be presented as evil, and good as good, and that the evil, even if condemned, be not presented alluringly.

The Legion of Decency is concerned not so much about the materials selected for a story as about the moral treatment of those materials. It is not the theme of a picture that is of major concern but the thesis; not the plot—whether this deals with murder, greed or lust—but the ethical implications which the plot, the action or the dialogue may convey. Does the story preach an immoral doctrine? Does it propose a false estimate of human conduct? These are the all-important questions. The Legion of Decency, in short, does not object to human problems being dramatized on the screen; it does not deny that sin and crime may at times be necessary ingredients of a plot; but the Legion is deeply concerned with what elicits the sympathy of the audience and influences its judgment. The audience must not be led to accept false principles and to condone wrong-doing.

When moral evil is portrayed in a film, it should never be pictured as good, admirable, or justifiable. And, conversely, moral good should never be proposed as evil, foolish or despicable.

