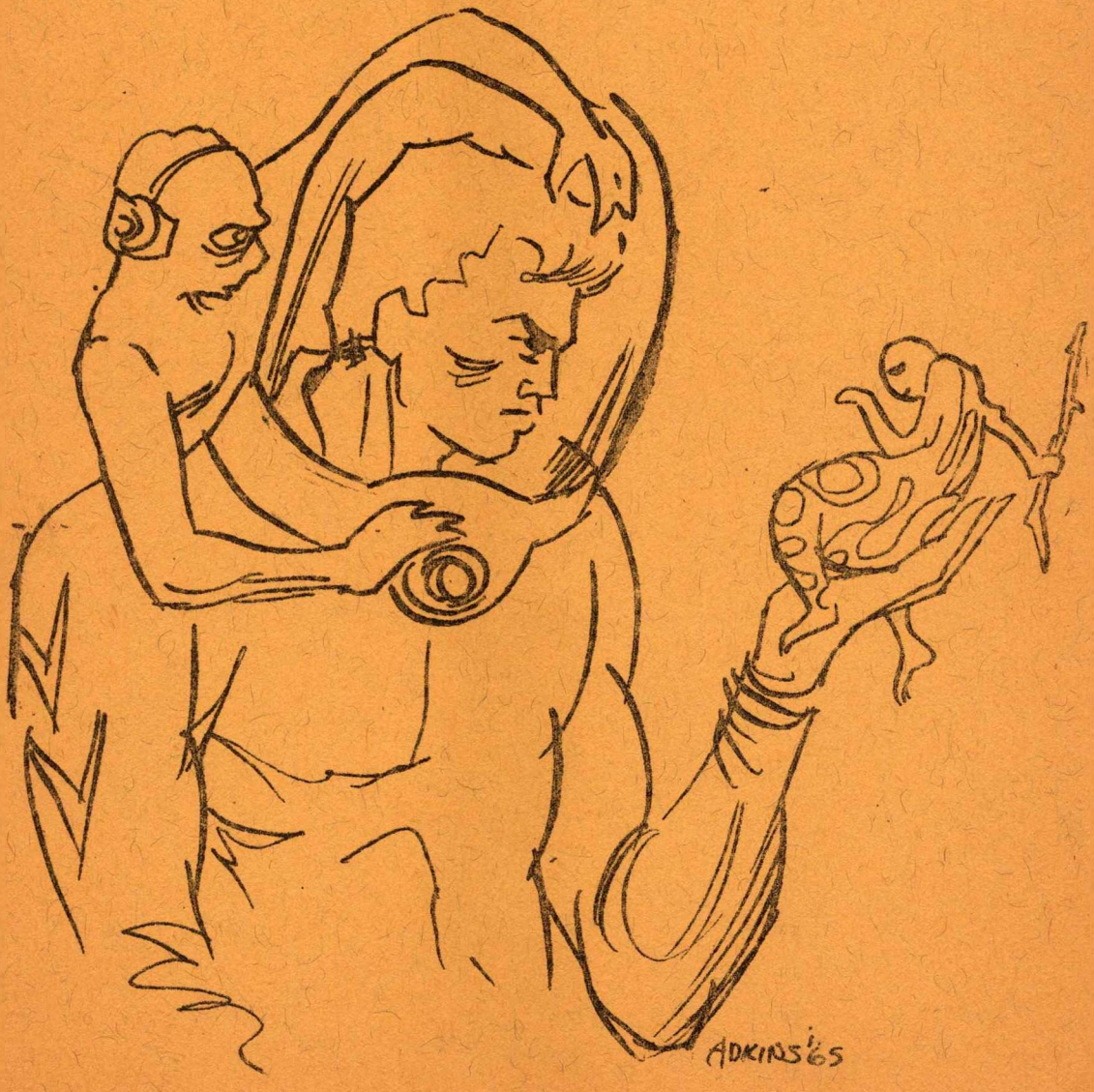
Solecism I



SOLECISM

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OF FILMS AND VIOLENCE:

I have no way of knowing whether violence is more common in today's films than it was 15 or 20 years ago, but it seems to have become more explicit and brutal. And many films display a new attitude toward violence. No longer is violence exclusively a force of evil. Today, it is tolerated as a means toward good ends as well. The men who compose the Dirty Dozen, for instance, are possibly the most vicious collection of soldiers ever assembled on the screen. And they're on our side.

I think this is an important distinction. Violence in the movies is neither good nor bad in itself. No subject matter should be judged apart from its context. What matters is not violence itself but how it is presented--whether it is seen as lawless and futile. Or whether it is seen as being legitimate.

It has been the belief of a clear majority of the citizens of this country that tolerence of opposition views is necessary in order for democratic government to function. A losing political party does not go to the barricades. It prepares for the next election. In theory, our political institutions reflect majority opinion and protect minority rights. But in recent times, this theory seems to have been placed on trial; a number of Americans no longer seem to believe in it.

This disbelief in the democratic process is reflected in many contemporary American films, and violence is suggested as the logical alternative to dialog.

Now that the elementary and high schools have been dismissed for the summer, a number of motorcycle gang pictures have been released in anticipation of the increased attendance by young people. In all of these pictures, gangs resembling the Hells Angels demonstrate their scorn for law-abiding society; and imply that self-respect is possible only when differences are settled on a personal or gang level through violence.

In The Born Losers, a film released late last summer, the hero stood up against a motorcycle gang and declared himself in favor of law and order. For his trouble, he was beaten to a pulp.

As I write this, the most popular movie in the Loop is Wild in the Streets, in which a group of young people take over the government. They are described in the film as being "swingers". They are not. They are totalitarian statists. Upon gaining control of the govern-

ment, they put all citizens over the age of 30 in concentration camps. The denizens of these camps are kept tractable by daily doses of LSD.

At first glance, it would seem easy to dismiss Wild in the Streets. It is not a very good film. But the fact remains that it is extremely popular among the local teen-agers. The Oriental theatre where it is now being shown generally plays to a full house. The audience cheers Max Frost and his cronies. Twenty-five years after Auschwitz, goodly numbers of Chicago teen-agers, most of whom are currently students in our public and parochial schools, all of whom have studied history and civics are cheering totalitarianism.

And what is worse, I doubt they even realize it.

Wild in the Streets is, in fact, opposed to the totalitarian takeover it portrays. The audience I saw it with didn't seem to understand this. There is something disturbing in the way the audiences have misinterpreted this film. They are cheering intolerence; they are applauding the most appalling violations of civil liberty. And they seem to have no idea that the attitudes they are expressing are similar to those displayed by Red Guard terrorists in Mao's China.

It is necessary, however, to draw a distinction between films of the ilk of Wild in the Streets and other films in which violence is present.

Because of its popularity, Bonnie and Clyde has borne the brunt of attacks against violence in films. It is the wrong target. Of all the 'violent' films of recent years, it is perhaps the only one that fully understands violence and is thus able to make a relevant statement about it. Bonnie and Clyde is actually a commentary on other violent films. It is an examination of the way in which the mass media glorifies violence.

And that is where any examination of violence in films should eventually lead: to the audience. Where have these people come from, these people who cheer cruelty, who spread the word from one to another that the latest motorcycle flick is a "good" one? For them, violence has replaced sex as the big box office draw.

Perhaps they are a by-product of the intolerence that is surfacing in many portions of our society. We have recently seen, in Chicago, 'homeowners' threatening Negro schoolchildren. We have seen assassination become an occupational hazard of American political life. We have seen the arrogance of students who ransaked a professor's office and destroyed his research files because they disagreed with his political beliefs.

Perhaps it is not the movies, then, but their audience that should concern us. In a different sort of society, movies displaying totalitarian violence might not be popular. I understand they do very little business in Britain, despite their popularity in this country. And they are a fairly recent phenomenon; the current cult of violence is hardly two years old.

Apparently the audience existed before the movies came along to serve it. The first motorcycle picture, The Wild Angels, was made almost absentmindedly. Its producers were shocked to discover what an enormous success they had on their hands. Something in American society, perhaps the intolerence which so many citizens feel toward those with different opinions, had already prepared an audience for this kind of violent film.

The movies are, after all, a small part of the nation's life; and they usually follow popular trends instead of creating them. Motion picuture producers are among the most conservative creatures in the world. Before they invest their money in a film, they have to be satisfied that a substantial market exists for it. If violence were to be eliminated from films, would it be eliminated from society at the same time? I doubt it. Excessive violence in films may be a symptom of sickness in present-day society, but it is not the disease.

It may be, however, that the misuse of violence in films has now come full circle. Originally the children of violence in our society, these films may now be perpetuating and reinforcing it. I have no way of knowing if this is the case. But it does seem possible.

If so, censorship of violence in films is not the answer; censorship can never be the answer in a free society. Supressing films such as The Born Losers, The Good, The Bad and The Ugly, and The Mini-Skirt Mob because a few might be harmed by them is parallel to denying citizens access to weapons (through exceedingly difficult and restrictive procedures for obtaining permits), restricting access to drugs, etc. The pro-censorship forces argue that "exploitation films" may put ideas into the heads of the unstable. Possibly. But I happen to think that the only real cure is not censorship but a reorientation of society towards sexual freedom and away from its currently popular substitute--violence.

Censors: People who see three meanings where there are only two.

SECURITY IS A WARM EL:

I always avoid the distinguished-looking man with the steel-rimmed glasses because he takes a couple of belts of whiskey every morning before he boards the el. The fumes, at 7:45 A.M., are not to be endured. I don't know what occupation awaits him when he reaches the loop, but he must approach each day with loathing if he relies on whiskey to stiffen his resolve. Yet there he sits morning after morning, with a brief case on his lap and liquor on his breath, jogging over the rails to face torments that his fellow passengers will never share.

They all sit or stand there, morning after morning, on the same train, in the same car, even in the same seats or the same place in the aisle if they can arrange it. And I sit or stand among them with my lunch under my arm, reading my invariable newspaper, and no one can penetrate the walls of solitude that envelop us.

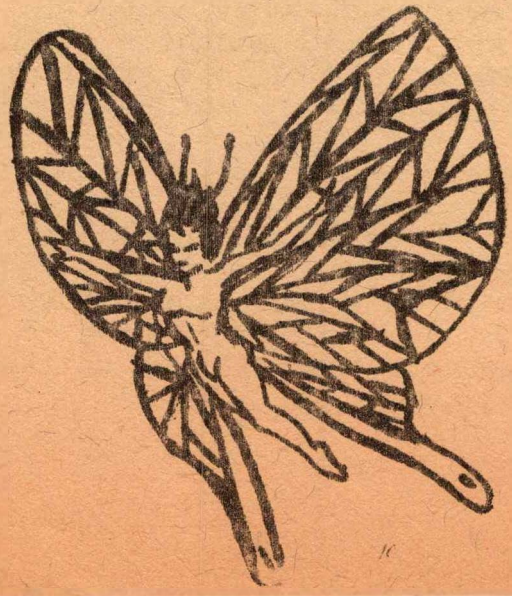
Each of us draws strength from the routine to which we are committed, and we feel disturbed when it goes awry. I continue to fret about the girl who used to board the el with me, always entering the door just as I did. She generally wore white gloves and smiled pleasantly, but we never spoke except one morning when she arrived late. I saw her running up the stairs to the platform, purse flopping from her arm, feet clacking along in the ineffective little steps of a woman in high heels, tight skirt and a great hurry. I stood in the door, one foot on the platform the other in the train, while the conductor protested, and when she dashed aboard, she thanked me. After that we never spoke again, but I felt that a special bond existed between us. Now she no longer rides the 7:45. She has gone, and I shall not learn her fate.

But most of the familiar figures appear each morning, five days a week. One I see is a portly man with gray, crew-cut hair and a red, angry face. Almost alone among the male passengers on the 7:45 he caries no brief case (if you must know, I don't carry a brief case either), but he reads a newspaper. The Wall Street Journal. Two minutes before the train reaches Washington St., he arises, the first in the car to do so, and strides up the aisle to stand at the door. When the train stops and the door opens, he springs out and heads up the stairs as though the devil were after him.

Not far behind him comes a round-faced blonde who piles her hair on top of her head. She takes pains to deck herself out attractively, but if a man looks at her, she glares defensively.

I never look at her.

Another girl,who customarily sits toward the front of the car, has matured remarkably in the few years that I have been riding the 7:45. She formerly braided her hair in a pigtail which hung down her back, but recently she had it cut. A healthy, well-upholstered, red-cheeked girl, she usually dresses in orange or rusty browns, which are most becoming to her. I have considered telling her she looks charming in bobbed hair, but one doesn't speak to strangers on the train. I doubt that she would scream or call the cops. She doesn't look like the easily excited type. I don't know what she would do. And I'm not going to find out.



Trainmen may safely adress passengers if they choose to, but most of them are old men about to be displaced by automation, and have enough problems of their own without chattering all the way from Howard St. to the Loop. One conductor, a skinny young man of pallid complextion and great height conducted a mobile dalliance with a girl who sat in the first seat on the right-hand side of the car. As I left the el each morning, I used to see her lingering in earnest conversation with her conductor. She was a very appealing girl with dark eyes and hair, and she used to gaze up at him with undisguised adoration. He would stand before her, gangling and at ease, apparently unimpressed by the affection so freely offered.

I concluded that she was too good for him, but perhaps he loved her in return. Perhaps their romance would blossom into marriage and an apartment new the Howard St. station so that, between trips, he could dash home to drink a cup of coffee or sharpen his transfer-punch.

A month ago, the world fell in upon the girl with the dark eyes and hair. The CTA put her conductor on a different run and replaced him with a white-haired conductor. Now she rides alone and silent, and when the el stops at Washington St. she hurries up the stairs with all the other passengers. I don't know where she goes.

I don't know where any of them go.

Anyone who fails to find beauty in the systematic destruction of mail-boxes has no soul.

Clad only in a hat, shoes and handbag, a shapely blonde model stepped from behind a bush on a country road near Amersham Sunday and in succession flagged down 20 motorists.

"There I was driving along, minding my own business, and all of a sudden out pops this bird without a stitch on," said Ron Hove, 27, a painter.

"She asked me the way to the nearest phone. I told her and drove on. I couldn't believe my eyes."

"I ask you, a beautiful blonde, stark naked," said Barry Main, a tractor driver. "M wife wouldn't believe it. She said I got a touch of the sun."

The model, 22-year-old Bobbie Wolsely, was paid $60 to test the motorists' reactions for a movie, The Fig Leaf. Her handbag contained a portable recorder which took down the motorists comments.

The handbag was also useful when one of the drivers called the police.

"She covered herself with the bag and that saved her from trouble with the law," said a police spokesman. "She was behaving in quite a proper manner. You wouldn't have seen any more of her at a swimming pool.

--Chicago Sun-Times, June 27, 1968

A word to the wise is unnecessary.
