

NUDITY, OBSCENITY, EROTICISM

The 'anything goes' attitude

Some feel that our new candor is a healthy release from an era of repression and hypocrisy

The old taboos are dead or dying. A new, more permissive society is taking shape. Its outlines are etched most prominently in the increasing nudity and frankness of today's films, in the blunt, often obscene language in American novels and plays, in the candid lyrics of pop songs and the undress of the avant-garde ballet, in erotic art and television talk-shows, in freer fashions and franker advertising. Behind this stands a society in transition, a society that has lost its consensus on such crucial issues as premarital sex and clerical celibacy, marriage, birth control, and sex education; a society that cannot agree on standards of conduct, language, and manners, on what can be seen and heard.

While artists and writers hail this new candor as a release from an era of Victorian repression and hypocrisy, many Americans are bewildered and concerned about the swiftness with which all the old restraints are losing their force.

Many citizens, psychologists, and social thinkers see in this rapid destruction of taboos a dangerous swing toward irresponsible hedonism and, ultimately, social decay. "It is the inevitable mark of decadence in our society," says British social commentator Malcolm Muggeridge. "As our vitality ebbs, people reach out for vicarious excitement, like the current sex mania in pop songs and the popular press."

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There are others, however, who reject the notion that the new permissiveness is a sign of moral collapse. "We are just beginning to discover what morality is all about," says theater critic Kenneth Tynan. "It is concerned with how we behave toward each other, not how much of our bodies we happen to display."

The climate of candor is very real and unlikely to reverse itself. "We're going to have to live with a degree of freedom much greater than anything we've known in the past," says Father Walter J. Ong, the brilliant Jesuit theologian. "Man can't just say anything goes and hope to get by. We're going to have to employ our minds and morals in determining that some things go and other things don't. We're going to have to constantly reassess the situation because it will always be changing."

It has changed more dramatically in the past year than in the preceding fifty.

Across the U.S., audiences pack art houses and neighborhood theaters to watch the multiple orgasms of a seldom-clothed young Swedish actress in *I, a Woman*.

Glossily mounted films such as *The Born Losers* and *The Penthouse* use excellent acting and shock techniques to reflect the violence and sex fever of the front pages. Gentle, white-haired old Spencer Tracy, in his last movie, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* dismisses bigots with a terse "screw all those people." Alec Guinness, in *The Comedians*, asks Richard Burton about Elizabeth Taylor: "You mean she's a good lay?" In *Barbarella*, a film built around the endless seductions of a French comic-strip heroine, Jane Fonda hops from one nude scene to the next in celebration of the erotic life.

Best-selling literature, once reluctantly discreet, is open and explicit about everything in the sexual spectrum from incest to inversion. *Valley of the Dolls*, *The Adventurers*, and

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The Exhibitionist use language once reserved to green-jacketed books smuggled in from Paris. Today what used to be called hard-core pornography can be found at the paperback rack at the corner drugstore. Even the intellectual press in Britain and the U.S. has been forced, in reporting the events of the day, to use language once only read on privy walls.

In pop music, the Rolling Stones sing "Let's Spend the Night Together" while fans wear buttons reading "Let's Lock Loins." TV viewers have seen David Susskind talking frankly with homosexuals. Wine and shaving-cream commercials chant: "Had any lately?" or "Take it off, take it all off." Dance companies from Africa and San Francisco perform naked in New York. Erotic-art shows draw enormous crowds. Skirts escalate past knees and thighs. Make-up is designed specifically to stay on in bed.

The forces that have produced this new freedom of expression are a permanent part of life. The history of the arts has been a constant assault on forms and conventions to get at the essence of man and explore the deepest regions of his mind, spirit—and body. When James Joyce unlocked Molly Bloom's earthy, human, profane subconscious, he opened a Pandora's box that has become the common property of today's novelists and film-makers, artists, potboilers, and pornographers.

This common admission of sexuality ultimately finds expression in franker sex-education courses in the Anaheim, California, and Evanston, Illinois, school systems, in which grade-school children are encouraged to bring the whispered words of the playground into the classroom for open discussion. It permits the creation of special high schools for pregnant girls in San Francisco and New York. It enables both clerics and laymen within the Roman Catholic Church to challenge pastoral policy on celibacy and birth control. It even

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permits the manufacture of baby-boy dolls equipped with sex organs.

There have always been writers like Havelock Ellis and D. H. Lawrence willing to talk frankly and an audience willing to listen. Until recently, agencies of moral order like the church, the government, the family, and the community have dictated what can and cannot be expressed in public. Since World War II, in America, however, these insituations have simply been overrun by the demands of a mass society that wants to see and hear everything.

Nowhere has this process been more graphically dramatized than in the erosion of film censorship. In the 1930's fear of government regulation drove Hollywood to create its own Production Code, which forbade a husband and wife to be shown in the same bed and banned the word buzzard because it sounded too much like bastard. The Roman Catholic Church also controlled film content through its Legion of Decency, whose "C" or "condemned" rating could bar a movie from hundreds of theaters fearful of local boycott.

After the Second World War, however, both code and church censorship started to crack. In 1946, Howard Hughes released *The Outlaw* in the face of a "C" rating and culled a fortune on the strength of Jane Russell's titanic cleavage. In 1956, Otto Preminger defied the code and its taboo on dope addiction when he released *The Man With the Golden Arm*.

Since then, the code has been revised twice; the Legion of Decency has changed its name to the National Catholic Office for Motion Pictures and has liberalized its judgments, but the power of both agencies is now feeble. Last year several major films ignored a "C" rating, among them *Blow-Up*, *Reflections in a Golden Eye*, and Preminger's *Hurry Sundown*. "The public makes up its own mind," says the chief execu-

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tor of the Production Code, Geoffrey Shurlock. "America has in time grown up to accept sex".

The courts, the last official restraining arm of society, have developed in recent cases such fluid guidelines for obscenity that local police agencies can seize and prosecute only those films and books that are "utterly without socially redeeming value." Even many of the tasteless hard-core paperbacks which could, under the law, be seized are more often than not ignored by district attorneys who feel no real pressure to do so from the community.

Not only has the mass society acquired the muscle, or perhaps more accurately, the money, to get what it wants, but what it wants has changed as well, under the pressure applied by a whole new generation of young people.

What the new generation wants is not simply bigger breasts and sexier scenes on wider screens. "They want to strip away all the sham and all the cant of their elders and to strive instead for truth and honesty," says TV impresario David Susskind. "This revolution has been made by young people and nothing will thwart it for the simple reason that truth will out. 'Tell it to me, baby. Tell it the way it really is.' These are the battle cries of the young."

Fashion designer Mary Quant, mother of the mini-skirt, tells it as it is, or at least the way she sees it: "Am I the only woman who has ever wanted to go to bed with a man in the afternoon? Any law-abiding female, it used to be thought, waits until dark. Well there are lots of girls who don't want to wait. Mini-clothes are symbolic of them."

The shattering of taboos on language, fashion, and manners is part of a larger disintegration of moral consensus in America. Vast numbers of Americans distrust their government. Catholics in increasing numbers simply ignore the church ban on birth control. The family has

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changed from a breeding ground of common values into a battleground of generations. These dislocations have moved many writers to reach for the strongest language in their arsenal to capture the chaos of their time. "We're in a time that's divorced from the past," says novelist Norman Mailer.

Things have changed radically since Mailer, in *The Naked and the Dead*, had to invent the word "fug" to evoke the raw language of the American soldier in World War II. Today Mailer, Hubert Selby, and a whole school of new young novelists use obscenity not merely as an imitation of street speech but as an antidote to their own outrage and frustration at what they feel is the increasing dehumanization of the high-technology industrial state.

Obscenity and nudity and eroticism, then, have become prime weapons for the artist as humanizer. He uses them to remind man that, amidst his electrical appliances and armaments and credit cards and daily costumes, he remains *Homo sapiens*. "Why don't we stop pretending that we're not mammals and that we don't do the things mammals do?" asks poet-playwright Michael McClure, author of *The Beard*.

Man as mammal, sexual, innocent, is the theme of today's erotic painters who use nudity to affirm life.

In much the same spirit, the dancers of Ann Halprin's Dancers' Workshop in San Francisco create nude ballets designed to help liberate their emotions and conquer the audience's fear of the human body. This is the feeling of most artists, that nudity and sexuality must be faced and accepted by society as part of a general confrontation of life. Once the artist has created this mature audience, he can move on to more important matters. Says Ed Sanders, lead singer with the Fugs, a scatological rock group, "It's when people

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know sex is not a threat to them and they accept it.”

Inevitably, freedom of expression in an open society is as accessible to the smutmaster as to the serious artist. Many best sellers simply pander perversions and profanity for profit.

The purveyors of this soft-core pornography legitimize their ventures with the same rationale used by serious artists: that they are breaking the bonds of puritan society and helping America to grow up. “Bernard Geis Associates is working toward a better, healthier, saner society,” says Bernard Geis, publisher of *Valley of the Dolls*, which chronicled the sexual aberrations of show-business figures, and *The Exhibitionist*, which salivates over the unhappy sex life of a Hollywood starlet. Says David Slavitt, who wrote *The Exhibitionist* under the nom de plume of Henry Sutton: “If pure pornography sold as well as the stuff I’m writing, Mr. Geis would sell pornography. After all, he’s a businessman.”

So is Radley Metzger, whose Audubon Films has already grossed \$1.5-million as the distributor of *I, a Woman*. Metzger has found, as did *Playboy* publisher Hugh Hefner, that there is a vast and variegated audience waiting to be titillated. “Why are laughter, anger, or pity legitimate reactions, but not sexual excitement?” asks Hefner.

“These best sellers and films are vulgar,” comments lawyer Ephraim London, “but they are no more vulgar than our architecture and neon strips and the pink flamingos on our lawns. Why should our best-selling films and books be any exception to a general vulgarity?”

Still, this logic does not stop citizens like London himself from worrying about the impact upon children. Some parents are determined to stem the tide, like Ruth Vaulman, a Chicago housewife with five children who recently led a letter-writing and telephone campaign against a local

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showing of *I, a Woman*. "Someone reminded me that Adam was nude, but Adam didn't go dancing across my neighborhood screen. Everything is just sex, sex, sex," says Mrs. Vaulman. "We mothers are concerned and don't know what to do."

They are not alone in their concern. Twenty-three separate bills on obscenity have already been introduced into the Ninetieth Congress. One, which establishes a Presidential commission on obscenity and pornography, passed last year after eight years of effort by South Dakota's Senator Karl Mundt. The commission, to be composed of eighteen citizens appointed by the President, will spend up to seventy-five dollars a day studying dirty books, working out a fresh definition of pornography, investigating the sale and distribution of smut with a view to proposing new laws for its control. But most officials agree with the Post Office's general counsel Timothy May. "The government is not here to enforce the Ten Commandments, and the wants of society are generally twenty years ahead of government."

Even the most powerful agent of moral restraint, the Catholic Church, has been struggling not to suppress the new candor but to develop a more flexible attitude itself in an effort to remain relevant within the permissive society. While conservative clerics in Rome, like Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani, deplore the relaxation of mores in the West, more "progressive" prelates urge a liberalization of the traditional Catholic position on sex and sin.

In fact, much of the new candor is coming from dissident Catholics themselves, among them the growing number of priests who are openly attacking the church policy on celibacy. One, James Kavanaugh, author of *A Modern Priest Looks at His Outdated Church*, has left the church, but his attacks continue. "The church," he says, "cannot make God into a

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crotchety old lady with frayed nerves. The church's distorted image of man's weakness and inclination to sin prevents it from serving the people."

In any case, no action, by either church or state, is likely to impede the advance of the permissive society.

Some artists and critics feel that it is simply one more swing in the pendulum of history between Dionysian and Apollonian styles of behavior, "I would expect the pendulum to swing back," says British director Tony Richardson. "Another historical movement will occur, some major cataclysm, and society will need heroics, more codes, ideals."

Architect and cosmic thinker Buckminster Fuller believes the pendulum is swinging back already—not the pendulum of history, but of evolution. As Fuller sees it, man's role as a procreator in an advanced society diminishes as fewer and fewer offspring are needed to ensure the survival of the species. "In the days of baby-making," he says, "the forbidden areas of the body were kept secret and promising in order to make us look forward to getting into bed. Once we start exposing ourselves as we're doing, sex gets to be a bore. The sexes themselves start to blur, and homosexuality increases, which also cuts down babies. Nature is putting on the brakes and man is unconsciously following. This is really an antisexual trend."

Most social thinkers, however, are unwilling to accept the dictates either of history or evolution, believing that man still exerts a crucial control over the shape of his future. They see the tumbling of the old codes not as the beginning of a moral decline, but as the beginning of a search for new values. If society does collapse in a hedonistic frenzy, it will be because this search has failed. "I think it's good to have an expressive, free, and imaginative society," says Max Lerner, "as long as you recognize some limits. These

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limits don't have to be puritanical. Without limits, our society can become as hedonistic as the world of the Marquis de Sade—going toward the most sadistic and primitive drives in the human being. It's not enough to break things down. Such a trend is not ultimately satisfying in itself. New values must be found and I believe young people are trying to find these values.”

It is impossible to know what new values will rise from the rubble of the old dispensations. Obviously, the emergence from prudery and hypocrisy imposes new responsibilities as it opens up new possibilities.

The permissive society, then, is an inevitable stage in a time of transition, a collective experiment in which spring up cheek by jowl the honest movies and the trashy ones, the vulgar books and the serious, the tough-minded plays and the titillating—all tolerated with an implicit faith that the new freedom will ultimately humanize and improve rather than corrupt. The breakdown of the traditional consensus has broadened the options available to each individual as to how he conducts his life. What he does with this freedom is another matter, and so far confusion and anxiety have characterized the new moral atmosphere.

Whether the new freedom produces good or ill depends on man himself. “Is man essentially a hedonistic, pleasure-loving, self-indulgent type?” asks theologian Martin Marty. “Is he essentially a purposeful, work-oriented, self-denying creature? We simply don't know.” What happens in the permissive society will go a long way toward enlightening every one of us.