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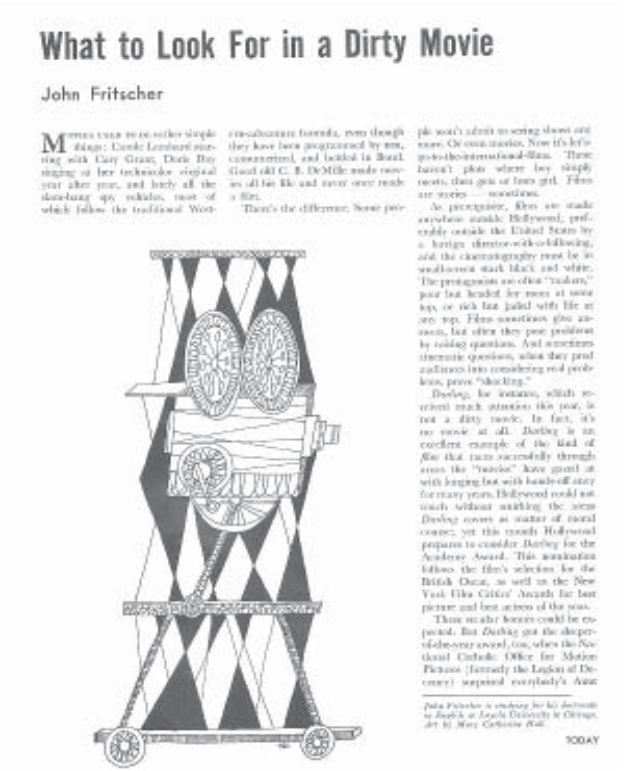
The Religious Sentimentalist:
A Non-Catholic Answers An Ex-Catholic



What to Look For in a Dirty Movie

John Fritscher

MOVIES USED TO BE rather simple things: Carole Lombard starring with Cary Grant, Doris Day singing at her technicolor virginal year after year, and lately all the slam-bang spy vehicles, most of which follow the traditional Western-adventure formula, even though they have been programmed by IBM, consumerized, and bottled in Bond. Good old C. B. DeMille made movies all his life and never once made a film. There's the difference. Some people won't admit to seeing sheer art films. Or even movies. Now it's let's-go-to-the-international-films. "Those haven't plots where boy simply meets, then gets or loses girl. Films are stories — sometimes.

As protagonist, films are made anywhere outside Hollywood, preferably outside the United States by a foreign director-with-a-following, and the cinematography must be so swell-it-must-stark black and white. The protagonists are often "realists," poor but headed for more at some top, or rich but jaded with life at any top. Films sometimes give answers, but often they pose problems by asking questions. And sometimes interesting questions, when they prod audiences into considering real problems, prove "shocking."

Darling, for instance, which received much attention this year, is not a dirty movie. In fact, it's no movie at all. *Darling* is an excellent example of the kind of film that races successfully through even the "movies" have given up on with hanging but with hands-off entry for many years. Hollywood could not touch without anything the term *Darling* covers as matter of moral course; yet this morally Hollywood prepares to consider *Darling* for the Academy Award. This nomination follows the film's selection for the British Oscar, as well as the New York Film Critics' Awards for best picture and best actress of the year.

Those are after honors could be expected. But *Darling* got the sleeper-of-the-year award, too, when the National Catholic Office for Motion Pictures (formerly the Legion of Decency) surprised everybody's Aunt

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There's the difference. Some people won't admit to seeing shows any more. Or even movies. Now it's let's-go-to-the-international-films. These haven't plots where boy simply meets, then gets or loses girl. Films are stories — sometimes.

As prerequisite, films are made anywhere outside Hollywood, preferably outside the United States by a foreign director-with-a-following, and the cinematography must be in small-screen stark black and white. The protagonists are often "makers," poor but headed for room at some top, or rich but jaded with life at any top. Films sometimes give answers, but often they pose problems by raising questions. And sometimes cinematic questions, when they prod audiences into considering real problems, prove "shocking."

Darling, for instance, which received much attention this year, is not a dirty movie. In fact, it's no movie at all. *Darling*, directed by John Schlesinger, is an excellent example of the kind of film that races successfully through areas the "movies" have gazed at with longing but with hands-off envy for many years. Hollywood could not touch without smirking the areas *Darling* covers as matter of moral course; yet this month Hollywood prepares to consider *Darling* for the Academy Award. This nomination follows the film's selection for the British Oscar, as well as the New York Film Critics' Awards for best picture and best actress of the year.

These secular honors could be expected. But *Darling* got the sleeper-of-the-year award, too, when the National Catholic Office for Motion Pictures (formerly the Legion of Decency) surprised everybody's Aunt Fanny by naming *Darling* "The Year's Best Film for Mature Viewers." The NCOMP called it a "caustic social commentary on the decline of a young Englishwoman. It explodes the timeworn myth that you can do whatever you so desire so long as no one gets hurt. However, because of its graphic delineation of theme the film is classified A-4, suited for mature viewers with reservations."

HERE THEN, is the ordinary movie-goer's problem. Just what should those "reservations" be? *Darling*, when properly analyzed, proves eminently moral. Do the "reservations" mean that no one

can casually drop into the theater, see the film, and then leave, simply popcorn-sated? Or do they mean perhaps that the film needs interpretation, that there is more to it than meets the eye, that one takes a different and new kind of enjoyment from these new films in proportion to what he brings to them? When, in other words, does the *movie-goer* become *filmgoer*?

Audiences enjoyed Astaire and Rogers time and again but in the passive, approving fashion of lotus eaters. Today, thanks to the new freedom granted to or taken by directors (and sensibly recognized as legitimate by moral forces such as the NCOMP), audiences can enjoy films in a new way, more *actively* and *critically*. The enjoyment is no longer so passive, with everything handed to the viewer. Artistically the director expects the filmgoer's active involvement. (One film currently in release has two endings. The audience votes which final reel they should like to see.)

The NCOMP, for instance, demands critical evaluation of the "artistic vision and expression" in films. The Vatican Council Decree on Communications consistently binds together the moral and artistic effects of movies. Specifically, it proclaims that "all must uphold the absolute primacy of the objective moral order...."

Darling, despite its surface depravity of beautiful sinners, is a strong testament of the needful and necessary primacy of objective moral order. Many "moralizing" movies have been made only to send discerning segments of the audience gagging from the theaters.

We oversimplify if we recall filmic reactions to World War II, but our parents remember *The Master Race*, where the good-guy Americans, in a total negation of realism, could verbalize sentimental propaganda only if parading the flag across the screen and trampling Nazis underfoot. They remember Bing Crosby, too, going everyone's way in the type of "wholesome" movie that spouted saccharine inanities while nuns Celeste Holm and Loretta Young hid medals in valuable vacant lots, hoping to con misers out of real estate. *Come to the Stable*, indeed!

Nevertheless, these movies, with their sentimental moralizing, are related to the true "message film," but in a rather awkward, pioneer way. At a more sophisticated level and far from these

maudlin relatives, *Darling* is at once a message film, a moral film, and an artistic delight. Yet, despite all its awards for the various "bests" of the year, *Darling* faces a difficult road to popular acceptance and, more importantly, to real understanding.

ON THE SURFACE, *Darling* has, sin and sensation, all that in some film formulas make for excellent box office. The plot has model Diana Scott, played by Julie Christie, chosen as "the happiness girl" by a mad ad agency. She works her way through television commercials, movie bits, several liaisons, an abortion, conversion to Catholicism, an attempted suicide, and marriage to an Italian count. Her life is plentiful and empty: she goes to Italy and says in the pit of her loneliness and fear, "The landscape here is so...so...religious." Ha!

With only this, the film has no message, no morality, no artistry. But more than melodrama operates here. This excellently edited film, besides being blessed with the face of Julie Christie and John Schlesinger's inspired direction, has what any work of Christian art has: a basic and functional metaphor.

In a metaphor, as we know, something stands for something else. For instance, the most common criticism of *West Side Story* was that juvenile delinquents don't dance in the streets. Literally this is true, but metaphorically the dancing is negotiable. Esthetically, an adult audience should find balletic pantomime of violence more pleasing than a sadistically simulated mugging of a defenseless adolescent. Art does have a way of transforming an ugly reality into a somewhat more tolerable enunciation which can be viewed more objectively, with less wincing. Ugliness and brutality can be cleansed of their senselessness by a certain ordering that the artistic mind can impose upon them.

Darling, in an unusual sense, is a well-ordered, purposeful horror film. The horror is intentional for the film investigates a psychology peculiar perhaps to our age: the fear of utter aloneness.

Put simply, something psychological is something abstract. To be dramatized, something, abstract must be made concrete. Because of the way *Darling* makes its abstract premise concrete,

the NCOMP, when deliberating over the proper classification, evidently did not feel that the film could be condemned because *Darling*'s premise is highly moral, even though the concrete metaphor that dramatizes the moral premise is, in the organization's mind, open to question. And it's precisely this "metaphor problem" that crops up in many good films today.

IN ANY WORK OF ART that tells a story on a literal level while it makes a point, perhaps a moral one, metaphorically, hints or suggestions are necessary to link the correlative movements of both levels. (Who could really believe, for instance, that *The Old Man and the Sea* is simply a sports story?)

In *Darling*, the key scene happens also to be the film's climax. Eight times the discarded "hero" screams at the discarding *Darling*: "You're a whore, baby." His insistent repetition of this sentence hammers together the disconnected pieces of the film's moments of reality. Admittedly this scene might titillate the pruriency of an audience viewing the film without "reservations." But an intelligent group, forewarned, can't help but understand that it is being told something.

The girl *Darling* has moved in a cut-throat business world where money and creativity mix with terms of cynical endearment. Everybody is on the make. Everyone *uses* everyone else. They step on one another in their mad race to the top. Shades of Martin Buber, they don't regard one another as people to be genuinely loved, but as objects to be used. They establish no I-thou relationships, but only I-it, where a person becomes an object to be *used* not *loved*.

This is the film's valid message about interpersonal relationships: people too often use one another as objects without regard for the Judaeo-Christian ethic of reciprocal human dignity. The metaphorical point of *Darling* is that everybody's a whore, baby! That is, everybody has a tendency to use rather than to love other people. The film, then, interpreted correctly, is a warning. But to understand the warning one must first understand the aforementioned basic metaphor.

Artistically, sex has always been the great creative metaphor for human giving and love. Biblically, sex is used to dramatize even divine love. For in the sex relationship, rightly employed, person encounters person on a level of love. But the girl *Darling* never loves personally; like a whore, she both uses and is used as an impersonal it-object. Sometimes it takes just such an ugly distortion of love to dramatize what true love can and should be on an interpersonal level.

The girl *Darling* does not live happily ever after; but the film *Darling* does. For in the broadening tolerance apparent in the Church since the Council, art and morality have been able to come to more intelligent terms with each other. The artist should not moralize; but if he serves morality (a different function), then even in his extremist metaphor he should receive reciprocal cooperation from important moral bodies. The NCOMP has recognized this. Now it not only allows but often recommends with proper "reservations" valid art which a more stringent, fearful, and defensive moral body would formerly have felt obliged to condemn out of hand.