

Tin Drum publicity misleading

by Larry Hannant of
The Chevron

The *Tin Drum* became a cause celebre in this province last spring when the Ontario Board of Censors refused to allow distribution of the film without making several cuts to pare out what it considered to be objectionable sexual scenes. When the North American distributor rejected the board's demand to cut the film, the battle was on.

Well at least the sound and fury of battle emerged, but with all the smoke two issues were obscured: *The Tin Drum* as a film, and the question of censorship.

Touted as a masterpiece which portrays the thrust of German history this century, *The Tin Drum* won an Academy Award for best foreign film of 1979 and the Golden Palm Award at the 1979 Cannes film festival.

The film is described as being anti-Nazi, and the North American distributor expressed some concern about a possible negative reaction from right-wing military dictatorships in South America, although the film apparently entered those countries uncensored.

NO WONDER. Opposition to Hitler's fascism is not by any means the political message of *The Tin Drum*. Although that is put forward in one scene, collaboration with the Nazis is equally sympathetically viewed, in others.

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One particular scene is frequently cited to support the contention that the film is scornful of the Nazis. In it Oskar disrupts a Nazi rally when he beats furiously on the tin drum, which is his constant companion from age three. Confused by the conflicting beat, the Nazi band members forget their march and strike up a Richard Strauss waltz, which sets the rally participants to dancing, making a mockery of the militaristic event.

The impression created is that Oskar, if not outright opposed to the Nazis, is at least contemptuous of them. But that principled stand is soon discarded, and Oskar joins the war effort by dressing up in a Nazi uniform and entertaining troops in occupied France. His success as an entertainer is immense, and he is ushered around France like a celebrity, enjoying the best food, wine and even a mistress.

In these contradictory images the main political message which emerges is pragmatism: Bend with the Nazis, when that appears to be safe, lean in the other direction when that's necessary for survival, or is personally advantageous.

But that flaw is not limited to the political message of *The Tin Drum*. Pragmatism is evident throughout the film, and it mars the artistic integrity, indeed the very character of the film.

Another example of this inconsistency is in technique. The film uses the device of setting up Oskar, the young hero, as an observer of the world, who regards with special distaste the hypocrisy and venality of his elders. His disgust with that world and his wish to stay out of it is such that he decides at age 3 to stage a fall down a flight of stairs, an excuse that will allow him not to grow. He remains in the same small physical condition until age 20, when he once again wills himself to grow and, we are led to believe, reach normal size, and take up a normal life.

But although he ceases to grow physically, he continues to mature — especially sexually — and at the age of 16 he fathers a son by his step mother. In the process he steps down from his pedestal as amoral observer and joins the sordid activities of his elders.

In fact he participates to the point of acting as indirect executioner of his own

father, mother and putative father. (There is some doubt about the identity of his true father. It might have been his mother's husband, or it might have been her first cousin.) If their deaths are justified it is only a heavy-handed and arbitrary standard of justice, and Oskar's participation in it sullies his reputation as a moral observer appalled by the adult world.

Oskar is to all intents and purposes an adult, although an unusual adult. This fact puts into question the reasoning behind the Ontario Board of Censors decision to excise certain scenes, i.e., that they show adults having sexual relations with a child. The point is that Oskar is not a child, but a diminutive adult. That may not have crossed the Board members' minds. More likely they responded on the most superficial level and took into account primarily the furor surrounding such events as the sexual exploitation and murder in 1978 of a young shoe-shine boy, Emanuel Jacques.

Critics have ridiculed the Board's demand to make a selected cut by saying, as John Kiely of the K-W Record did, that the objectionable scenes "are mild by any standard", and that the film must be shown uncut to retain its integrity. On the contrary, the film's message did not require the controversial scenes, "comparatively mild" though they might have been.

But dwelling on the issue of whether or not the cuts are demanded are sufficiently "mild" just confuses the issue. The real issue is not what is censored, but what is not, and why, and how are people to acquire a standard by which to decide morality.

There is an immense amount of smut proffered in Ontario, material without the least redeemable social value. In a sane social environment this material would be judged to be abhorrent. But in this society, people do not have immediate power to eradicate such smut, or even to avoid it and be sure their family is not exposed to it. Ordinary people do not control the influential, highly-monopolized media industry, the recording industry, the film industry and the advertising industry, which together make billions of dollars by peddling their wares.

Moreover, people are also confused, and who could blame them? Confusion about right and wrong is inevitable in a society characterized by such contradictory elements as the fact that while many people toil for \$2.50 or \$3.00 per hour, or can't find a job at all, huge corporations like Imperial Oil declare profits of hundreds of millions of dollars each year.

An atmosphere of mass economic, social, philosophical, artistic and political confusion is nurtured by those who hold power in this society so that such glaring contradictions can continue to exist.

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The Ontario Board of Censors simply fans the flames of confusion by choosing — apparently arbitrarily — to cut one film, such as *The Tin Drum*, but not another. I say "apparently arbitrarily" not because I don't think there was method in its choice of films, but because to most people the censorship appeared arbitrary, an idea which was encouraged by the critics, most of whom opposed the Board.

In this atmosphere, many people undoubtedly reasoned thusly: Countless films, magazines and advertisements of comparable or greater obscenity are exposed to the public every day; why pick on *The Tin Drum*?

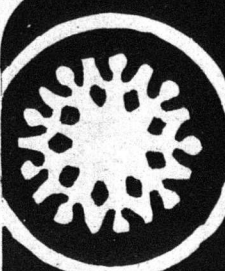
As the smoke of battle clears away it becomes obvious that the main protagonists in the controversy did not put forward any enlightening arguments to answer that question.

The Board of Censors failed to make a convincing case for its stand, and the critics were able to score a few points by their objections. But no objective standard of morality was achieved, and none was really sought by either side.

The *Tin Drum's* theme as a film is not removed from the issue at hand. It actually contributes to the confusion by

extolling pragmatism. For example, the reasons why the Nazis must be hated and defeated are nowhere evident in *The Tin Drum*. In fact, the viewer could just as easily conclude that it's best to side with, or to tolerate, the Nazis, since the hero goes along with the abhorrent crimes committed by fascism.


The outcome of all this is that a film which condones German fascism and teaches pragmatism has received an immense amount of publicity as an "anti-establishment" film. In addition the critics and censor Board have together mocked the idea of applying principles to questions of morality.



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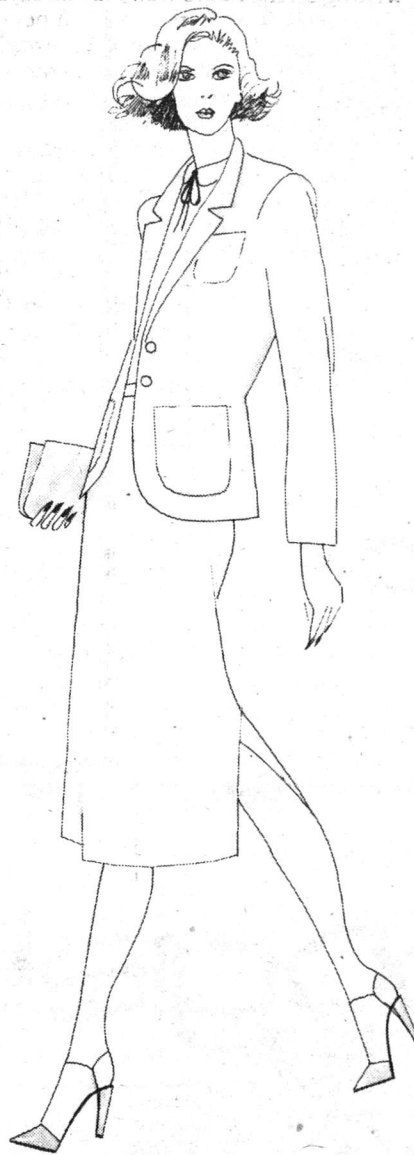
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