

which have vindicated Gary Cooper's conviction that "nothing moves like a horse".

Well, these days the Keystone Cops have been recycled into movies like *The French Connection* and the horse has been replaced by the motorbike and the car. Now the Western tends to be set in the Deep South and has Burt Reynolds being hotly pursued by no-neck, moronic sheriffs. Judged on this level, *Mad Max* is the apotheosis of visual vitality, a sort of blood-stained Sistine ceiling for the '70s. But films were also about ideas and, on this level, *Mad Max* is infamous.

I'm not about to argue a simplistic equation between cinema violence and the behaviour of thugs. There are documented cases of mass murderers being provoked by screenings of films as different as *The Sound of Music*, *The King of Kings* and *Patton*. But there is a relationship between the styles of violence and a small number of powerful, influential movies.

For example, when *The Blackboard Jungle* reached Australia's screens in the early 1950s it introduced a whole new era of delinquency. Its theme, *Rock Around the Clock*, was *The Marseillaise* for the teenage revolution, and the tumbrils it set in motion are still rock and rolling today. The biker gangs employed by Dr Miller for his stunts in *Mad Max* had their genesis in Stanley Kramer's 1954 movie *The Wild One*, starring a young Marlon Brando and Lee Marvin. And I well remember how the game of chicken was introduced to Australia by Nicholas Ray's *Rebel Without A Cause*, in 1955. Can anyone deny that *A Clockwork Orange* provoked a wave of copyist violence in the early part of this decade? (I well remember Stanley Kubrick's reluctance to let his own children see his film.) At the moment, Columbia's *The Warriors* is inspiring, or at very least choreographing, gang warfare across the US.

No, I'm not blaming the Harrisburg nuclear accident on *The China Syndrome*. But there has **always** been an interaction between brilliant cinema and social style. In the 1930s, James Cagney, when playing a gangster, would act the way he thought a real gangster acted. But there was evidence that the gangsters would act the way James Cagney acted. Thus did life imitate art imitating life.

And as sure as *God Created Women* created a few million honey-tailed Bardots around the world, *Mad Max* is going to stimulate some very spectacular road smashes and the odd pack rape.

Going back 10 years, I was totally opposed to censorship, particularly of sexual material. It is a recognition of Dr Miller's talent that his film has shaken me right to my basic assumptions. But then, the pornography of death in films



Malcolm McDowell in *A Clockwork Orange*: can anyone deny that it provoked violence?

like *Mad Max* is far more sinister than sexual pornography. The latter tends to resolve itself in masturbation, which is something you do to yourself. But violence? That's something you do to others.

(If only Miller had taken a leaf from *The Deer Hunter* and persuaded his Neanderthals to take up Russian roulette. Then he'd be lowering the delinquent population without increasing the road toll.) No, film is not simply about motion — it is also about **emotion**. Furthermore cinema is the most powerful method of communicating emotion and excitement — leaving the much-criticised television set for dead. Although cinema reaches far, far fewer numbers its potency is incomparable. Whereas television provides (at present at least) a small, pokey image, cinema overwhelms you with Panavision. With TV, you dominate and control the screen. In cinema, the screen dominates you. And where television is free and ubiquitous, cinema remains special, an event. And unlike television, the tensions are not punctured by the punctuation of commercials. Then, there's the way television is usually viewed in the presence of the family where movies like *Mad Max* are seen in the company of excitable peer groups. And cinema employs bigger budgets and better talents (few of the really electrifying directors work in television) and is light years ahead in its treatment of sexuality

and violence. By the time *A Clockwork Orange* or a *Last Tango* appears on telly, they've been filleted by the censor and, in any case, have long since lost their urgency, their ability to shock.

Bertrand Russell was a pacifist during World War I but in World War II became gung-ho to fight Hitler. When accused of inconsistency he replied, "Why? They're different wars." That's the way I'm starting to feel about censorship, because movies like *Mad Max* must surely promote violence. And if they don't, that's only because its thousand predecessors have dulled the sensibilities, desensitising the social conscience. Either way, they stand condemned.

I've watched extremely violent films in some of the roughest cinemas in New York where the violence in the foyer and the footpath puts the fantasies to shame. Given the social realities in, for example, Brooklyn, a movie like *The French Connection* comes as light relief. But Australian society is not (as yet?) as apocalyptic as America's. So the power of a *Mad Max*, which is unequivocally an off-shore American movie, is exaggerated. I suspect it's as dangerous as introducing our innocent Abos to alcohol.

Everyone would acknowledge the power of art to exalt the human spirit. Isn't it a little inconsistent, not to say intellectually sleazy, to scoff at its ability to degrade and debase? □