

First "Straw Dogs", now "A Clockwork Orange" have stirred angry controversy about film violence. Stephen Murphy is secretary of the censors who have been under attack for allowing those films to be shown.

How the film censor sees his own role

STEPHEN MURPHY has seen more acres of naked female flesh in the past six months than any two raincoated men in a Soho cinema queue.

That fact alone makes his views on the British film exhibiting industry — that sink of sex and violence if we are to believe the extremist view — worthy of serious consideration.

Anyone who attends a film is affected by his view because he is secretary of the British Board of Film Censors.

"On the whole," he says, "the British film industry is fairly responsible. Some extraordinarily nasty films are being made abroad and the industry doesn't attempt to import them."

"Some films, made particularly in the States and some European countries, are full of violence, viciousness and sex exploitation and the British industry won't have them."

"Sexploitation films made elsewhere are often made in two versions, a hard version and a much more gentle version."

It was occasionally so bad that even the principal actors refused to make some scenes in the hard versions.

British distributors, says Mr. Murphy, invariably take the more gentle version of a film.

Really, therefore, sex is less of a worry to him, as a censor and a liberal, than violence.

Mr. Murphy has come to his censor's job with impeccable qualifications to be the public's representative.

Are you worried about your child's moral well-being in this morally uncertain world?

He has a married daughter of 24, a son of 18, and a second son

who's glad he's just turned 14 and can go to AA films.

Are you worried that the censor has no experience of the effect films may have on children?

After Oxford, he taught for eight years at Manchester Grammar School. His subjects were history, English and Rugby and you can't get more decent-minded than that combination.

Are you worried that the censor is so Hampstead and progressive in his ideas that he's left the rest of us behind?

As a journalist's son, he has lived in Glasgow, Newcastle-upon-Tyne and Manchester. He regards Manchester as home, but now lives in safely respectable Twickenham.

My impression is that the board of censors tries



to hold a middle course and that it gives its certificates on the basis of what is acceptable to what it believes to be public opinion.

Mr. Murphy wouldn't accept any of my attempts to encapsulate his opinions. He dismissed one attempt — ever so nicely — as a "gross, gross oversimplification."

So he probably won't accept my summary in the previous paragraph though he did say that reflecting public opinion was a major element in the board's work.

He mentioned the number of meetings and discussions they held to try to gauge opinion — church societies on one hand, universities on the other. Then there are reading and correspondence and talking to specialist bodies like the National Association for

Mental Health.

He also believes in diplomacy so he is called in by film-makers at every stage, even at the script stage.

A few years ago, said Mr. Murphy, there had been a very considerable agreement on what was socially right.

Two wings had now peeled off — one was strongly against censorship believing that it held up society's proper development. The other said that just as society demanded social responsibility from other people so it demanded responsibility from the artist and it was afraid that the actions and work of some artists could be injurious to society individuals.

On the whole, the Press, radio and TV were interested only in portraying clashes and con-

troversy and it was difficult for people thinking round the centre ground to be represented.

I gathered that he was part of the centre ground. Obviously, because of his job, he couldn't be entirely permissive. As he put it: "Would you show 'The Devils' (about a Roman Catholic priest apparently gone wrong) in Belfast?"

All this meant that the vast majority of the 500 decisions made by the board every year were unchallenged. It was only on a minority of films that the decisions were disputed.

A film was seen by two examiners and if they were at all worried he and two other examiners saw it — though rarely a day went by without his seeing a film and once he'd seen five full-length films in a day, the last one as part of a social occasion.

Then they might consult the President, Lord Harlech, and see the film a third time. They also used specialist consultants, a psychiatrist, for instance.

After schoolmastering, Mr. Murphy went into educational broadcasting, then he was a BBC overseas service producer, then a Home Service producer and a TV talks producer. Finally, he'd joined the Independent Television Authority as a senior programmer, partly concerned with plays and stories.

The cinema, he said, had been re-thinking its position since the days when everything was family escapism.

TV had the problem of going into people's homes — they were very conscious of that in TV — and being seen by people of varying generations.

But in the cinema there was none of that. You chose to go to the cinema and you chose the company you went with. The cinema audience, therefore, tended to be younger than the TV audience and with different attitudes.

The cinema was still making good family films but it was also able to ex-

tend itself as a result.

The censors had to act for local authorities, and there was a difference between the opinions of those in the conurbations and the others. The board's success was that film-makers appealed to local authorities against the board's refusal to grant certificates much more than people appealed against the certificates.

His six months in office had aged him two years and six months because he didn't like being the centre of controversy and he was surprised at the savagery of some of the argument.

He was pushed into extreme positions and he didn't believe extreme positions were useful. He was a moderate, middle of the road man.

They had to make a decision — they had to give a Yes or a No. They saw everything before anyone else and they had great encouragement when they said Yes to a film about which they were unhappy and the critics and the public agreed with their decision.

They had to keep on holding the balance, even when they were in the middle of a controversy over an earlier decision — for instance, they'd decided about "A Clockwork Orange" while everyone was arguing about "Straw Dogs".

The board sees 500 films a year, bans about 20, cuts a lot more — was there any pleasure left for Mr. Murphy in seeing a film?

He allowed that there were films he loathed but it would be unforgivable if any group imposed its personal tastes.

He loved films, loved, loved them. Films were a more interesting medium than television, he thought.

He had the widest possible taste — he roared with laughter at a "Carry On" film. He shuddered with a Hammer film. He was, he said, lucky.

Peter Blacklock



Sam Peckinpah, the American director who has been at the centre of a storm of controversy over his film "Straw Dogs", talks to the film's star, Dustin Hoffman (left). Peckinpah feels that the British critics, who protested about scenes of rape and violence in the film, did not get the inner meaning of the film.

"To me," he says "the true meaning of the film is that a man

fleeing from commitment in a very violent society unconsciously incites violence. Everybody seems to deny that we are human. They seem to think man is a noble savage. But he is only an animal — a meat-eating, talking animal. We are violent by nature. We are going to survive by being violent. It's one of the greatest brainwashes of all time to say we are not.

What I tried to do was take an audience and hold up a mirror to the weaknesses within themselves and almost rub their noses in it. Obviously some people were very disturbed. This was my intention and I trust some people will try to judge themselves a little more carefully. I expected the British critics to understand this, but very few of them seemed to realise what the film is all about."