

opinion

Scissors & Celluloid

In the Realm of the Censors

By ADRIAN IWACHIW

The Ontario Censor Board's recent banning of four films scheduled to be shown in the Forbidden Films festival strikes a caustic irony. The festival's intent—accomplished by screening banned, censored and suppressed films from various countries—was to initiate discussion about film censorship from a human rights perspective.

It was organized by the Toronto Arts Group for Human Rights, supported by the provincial and federal arts councils, and designed to aid Amnesty International. Why, then, was a mature and intelligent audience, interested in the human rights violations of cinematic expression around the globe, prevented from seeing these films? Is the censor board, for that matter, immune to the supposed harmful effects of their viewing, whereas festival patrons would not be?

It was not the first time the censor board had acted to prevent the screening of critically lauded films. As if in response to such criticism, an article by the board's Christopher Yost appeared in a recent issue of the *Sunday Star*, which referred to two of the banned films, *Salo* and *In the Realm of the Senses*, alongside references to *Precious Adolescence* and *Emmanuel in America*.

The article included a lengthy and graphic description of *Salo* in all its gory detail; it also made clear that the last two films combine violence with sexual abuse (rape and beating of teenaged girls, women cut up with knives, hung on meat hooks and tortured to death). About *In the Realm of the Senses* it only stated that a woman strangles her partner to death while making love.

Salo has been described as an "anguished cry from the bowels of hell." It is an explicit attack on fascism and its underlying psychology, portrayed through a recreation of the Marquis de Sade's *120 Days of Sodom*. Its director, novelist-poet-journalist-filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini had himself been charged over 30 times for obscenity and other crimes up until his mysterious murder in 1975.

Much maligned by right-wing sectors of the Italian press, his screenings had frequently been disrupted by audience members yelling obscenities, throwing eggs and the like—despite the Catholic International Cinema Office's endorsement of a number of his films (including their awarding of a prize for *Teorema*).

It remains debatable whether the extreme portrayals of sex and violence in *Salo* were morally or aesthetically justified. The British Board of Film Censors' Secretary James Fernan described *Salo* as a "most disturbing" with a "deeply serious" purpose. "It is quite certainly shocking, disgusting and revolting," he wrote, "but it is meant to be. He (Pasolini) wants us to be appalled at the atrocities of which human nature is capable when absolute power is wielded corruptly." However, the debate that should take place about the merits of *Salo* cannot materialize if it is not allowed to be seen.

"Our research has led us to believe that it is not the pornographer who is censored, it is the artist. . . . It seems that rather than attempt to improve the face of society, the censor would rather break the mirror."

—Judy Wolfe,
Toronto Arts Group for Human Rights

Nagisa Oshima's *In the Realm of the Senses*, say reports, is a beautifully photographed film based on the true story of an obsessive relationship set in Imperial pre-World-War-Two Japan. Supposedly breathtaking in its sexual and violent explicitness (the film consists largely of acts of unstimulated sexual intercourse), it was ruled obscene in 1976 by a Japanese court. Oshima, a consistent socio-political critic both in his films and in his polemic, responded by questioning the validity of his judges. The film was eventually released in Japan and elsewhere.

Also banned by the Board were Jean Genet's *Un Chant d'amour*, a 20-minute study of a passionate homosexual affair in a Paris prison, and *Sweet Movie*, a film by Yugoslav director Dusan Makavejev.

Sweet Movie is about the relationship between sex and politics. The director's unique cinematic collage bombards the audience with images. Juxtaposing humor with the macabre, documentary newsreel footage with fiction, and multiple plots with interviews, the movie satirizes both eastern bloc totalitarianism and western commercialism. The result is a kind of subversive anarchy that joyfully affirms the superiority of instinct over intellect.

The film includes several explicit scenes, both of a sexual and shocking nature—if something as natural and everyday as feces could be considered disgusting. It is crucial, however, to distinguish between a film such as this, where the imagery is subordinate to the socio-political intentions of the filmmaker, and pornography.

"A film can portray violence in a way that brutalizes the audience," says Forbidden Films organizer Peter MacCallum,

"and turns the viewer into a voyeur; or alternately—there are several examples in the festival—it can portray the same acts in a way that arouses the viewer's compassion for the victim and political understanding of the causes."

Unfortunately, America's mainstream media failed to make this distinction when *Sweet Movie* was released. In a cover story on porn, *Time* magazine lumped it together with *Deep Throat* and other more obviously exploitative flicks derided for their 'immorality.' The Ontario Censor Board seems to have little patience with such distinctions, and by banning *Sweet Movie* all possible discussion is silenced.

Mary Brown, the board's eloquent and controversial spokesperson, is quick to deny that any such distinction exists.

Whether the film is pornographic and sexist or artistic in intent, "it's all in the mind of the producer-director, Brown says. She says the Censor Board includes artists and "leading authorities" in film and the arts, such as Gerald Pratley, director of the Ontario Film Institute, and film and opera critic Aldo Maggiorotti, and writer Austin Clarke.

Brown says the four banned films "violated the guidelines" set forth by the board. These 'community' guidelines, Brown says, are publicized and subject to board alteration according to how the public responds. "The board," Brown says, "is only administering a legislative act called the Theatres Act."

Pasolini's *Salo*.

However, the constitutionality of the Theatres Act has been recently questioned. When Canada's new Charter of Rights went into effect in 1982, the Ontario Film and Video Appreciation Society (OFAVAS) quickly established itself to challenge the Theatres Act. They submitted four films to the board for approval—*Not a Love Story*, *Rameau's Nephew*, *A Message from Our Sponsor* and *The Art of Worldly Wisdom*—as a test; all four were denied permission to be screened. Subsequently, OFAVAS took the Censor Board to court. Since then, the Censor Board changed its mind about *Rameau's Nephew* and *The Art of Worldly Wisdom* for showings at the Forbidden Films Festival, and Brown maintains that *Not a Love Story* "has never been refused a license for public exhibition."

The Ontario Supreme Court ruled that the Theatres Act was unconstitutional because of its requirement that all films be submitted for Ontario Censor Board approval before exhibition. In effect, the Censor Board's rights became limited to film classification after the ruling. However, a special court order allowed it to continue its activities as before until the Supreme Court of Canada rules on the board's appeal next spring.

In such legal uncertainty the board continues to operate in a way that antagonizes experimental filmmakers and visual artists. The Funnel Experimental Film Theatre's Open Screenings have been disallowed since the films brought to these screenings could not be pre-screened by the board. Funnel director David McIntosh estimates the theatre spends \$2,500 per year on costs incurred by the Theatres Act, including Censor Board processing and the shipping of the films and forms to and from the board.

In an unprecedented move by Theatres Board officials on May 31 of this year, several British art videos and equipment were seized from the art gallery A Space, further angering the art community. The videos were shown as part of a critically-acclaimed British-Canadian Cultural Exchange; art galleries, however, are required to sign an affidavit saying that videotapes to be screened meet 'community standards' and A Space neglected—or refused—to do this.

Last month, a County Court judge ruled that the confiscated videotapes are to be returned to A Space, and that the section of the Theatres Act empowering theatre board officials to seize materials "is inconsistent with the Charter [of Rights]" and is "of no force and effect."

With all the controversy over the effects of violence on film and television—the movies *First Blood* and *Friday the 13th* have both been implicated as inspirations for two recent Ontario murders—one wonders why the Censor Board (or, technically, the Theatre Branch of the provincial Consumer and Commercial Relations Ministry) is so heavilyhanded in its dealings with art galleries.

Michael Snow's *Rameau's Nephew* and Bruce Elder's *Art of Worldly Wisdom* are two examples of art films up until recently banned by the board. *Rameau's Nephew* is a 4½-hour investigation of perception and communication that includes 15 seconds of sexually explicit material, while the latter is a subjective contemplation of the human situation, featuring two controversial scenes: a naked woman and a man masturbating.

Meanwhile, *First Blood*, *Friday the 13th*, and other films like *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* may get a few cuts, but are still shown to mass audiences—it's what these audiences, supposedly, want to see: mindless, gratuitous violence.

It is also what Hollywood so eagerly churns out; and where Hollywood is involved, there is the financial backing to make sure that people get to see it.

"The notion that censorship is the solution to misogyny and violence is like trying to cure measles by powdering the spots."

—journalist June Callwood

The same could be said of Hollywood sex-films. Films like *Blame It On Rio* are allowed to depict blatantly sexist relationships in a soft and titillating framework, but films like *Not a Love Story*, which is explicitly against pornography, encounter Censor Board resistance.

This kind of double standard, one for mass entertainment and another for the artistic expression of a minority, is consistent with the findings of the Forbidden Films organizers. Judy Wolfe, a board member of TAGHR, writes, "Our research has led us to the conclusion . . . that it is not the pornographer who is censored, it is the artist."

The world of state censorship abounds with examples of such double (or multiple) standards. In Brazil, the state-run Embrafilme produces soft-core porn in abundance for city dwellers; yet, a film like Tereza Trautman's *The Men I Loved*, which reverses male and female stereotypes, can be banned for 10 years or more before being shown publicly. *The Men I Loved* is a comedy that questions the country's social status quo: in Brazil, a man who murders his wife could be acquitted if it's proven that she was having an extramarital affair.

In countries of varying political persuasion, artists often face brutal repression. After spells of relative freedom in Czechoslovakia (1961-68), Yugoslavia and Brazil in the late '60s, Chile up until the CIA-backed 1973 military coup, Bulgaria, Hungary, Poland, Rumania, Argentina and elsewhere, filmmakers have been forced to flee their countries or disallowed to continue making films. The list includes Czechs Jan Nemeč, Milos Forman, and Ivan Passer, Yugoslavs Makavejev and Petrovich, Poles Skolimowski and Polanski, Soviet Jews Bogin, Gabay and Kalik, Chileans Ruiz and Littin, Bolivian Jorge Sanjines, Turk Tufan Gunar, Russian Andrei Tarkovsky—the list of exiled filmmakers seems almost endless. The Argentinian Raymundo Gleyzer disappeared in 1975. His most famous project was the Grupo Cine de las Base' *The Traitors*, a 1973 docudrama about corruption among labor officials. No less than 35 Chilean filmmakers went into exile as a result of the 1973 Pinochet coup.

Tereza Trautman's *The Men I Loved*, banned in Brazil.Argentinian film *The Traitors*, about the fictional rise and fall of a corrupt labor official. The director disappeared in 1975.

In South Africa, blacks are denied filmmaking knowledge and training; the only "black" films are products of white film companies made for the black market. Politically uncomfortable ideas, including depictions of violence, are cut out of imported films destined for black audiences. For example, the black secret agent in *Live and Let Die* was cut out by the distributor before even being sent to South Africa, because of her sexual relationship with James Bond.

In the US and Canada, censorship takes a more oppressive turn during times of crisis. In the McCarthy trials of the 1950s, artists, writers and filmmakers were persecuted for alleged communist sympathies. Directors like Joseph Losey and Jules Dassin were blacklisted and forced to leave the country.

The documentary artist Emile de Antonio has had the FBI on his footsteps ever since making his 1961 film on the McCarthy hearings, *Point of Order*. De Antonio claims to have been the subject of continual police harassment, physical and electronic surveillance and general interference. FBI documents recently released under the Freedom of Information Act have proven De Antonio's claims.

In Canada, these crises have included the FLQ affair: between 1970 and 1975, NEB films perceived to be radical or expressing sympathy for Quebec separatism were banned by the film board's commissioner Sydney Newman. These included Jacques Leduc's despairing *Cap d'espoir*, Robin Spry's *Action*, a sympathetic survey of the development of separatism, Gilles Groulx's *24 heures ou plus* and Denys Arcand's *On est au coton*.

Film censorship takes an almost unlimited number of forms. In the pre-production phase, state authorities may make it necessary to submit scenarios and scripts for clearance. In the production phase, economic censorship is frequently carried out by a state production or distribution company: total state control is practiced in Soviet Union and many 'Third World' nations.

In Pakistan, you cannot buy film stock without a license, and a license cannot be obtained without state approval of the script you plan to shoot.

In the US the situation is quite different, but the results can sometimes be surprisingly similar. The American film industry is dominated by the six major distributors—United Artists, Universal (MCA), Warner Brothers, Paramount (Gulf and Western), Twentieth Century Fox and Columbia. In the interests of consumer digestibility, the length of films is often cut by the distributors, and sometimes re-edited. Many, like Bill Gunn's *Ganja and Hess*, a black film praised by critic James Monaco as "one of the most original and exciting films of the seventies," have completely disappeared due to their lack of commercial clout. The only complete print of *Ganja and Hess* is a badly damaged copy in New York's Museum of Modern Art; the owners of the original re-edited their copy, added additional scenes and gave it a new soundtrack and title, unaware that the film had received standing ovations at Cannes.

"If I were legislating my taste, we could ban self-righteous movies, manipulative movies, reactionary movies, boring movies, humorless movies, and grossly sentimental movies. Of course, Odeon and Famous Players would have a problem: there wouldn't be enough left to fill their screen."

—Martin Knelman,
theatre and film critic

Distributors can lavish funds on a film or else release it without any promotion. In one case, the 146-minute *Twilight's Last Gleaming* was cut down to 92 minutes by its British distributors.

Taxes can be used to further economically strangle the officially-disapproved filmmaker. Screening venues are generally licensed, and thereby controlled.

If these techniques are not enough, there is the self-censorship of film industries (like Hollywood), which either know what the state would do and fear reprisals, or simply support the status quo. In Yugoslavia, for example, no film since Makavejev's officially-decried *W.R.: The Mysteries of the Organism* of 13 years ago has drawn any connection between sex and politics.

There is also the form of mass censorship called literacy: its continued presence among Brazil's rural masses, Tereza Trautman says, guarantees their inability to find out about social and

political alternatives, to educate themselves and therefore to rise above their poverty.

The reasons for censorship vary far and wide.

At its worst, it is an attempt by political power brokers to maintain control over the masses: it protects and promotes a political regime, and enforces an ideology or dominant culture.

At its best, censorship is a means to protect 'community standards,' public morality and religious values, to foster a just and cohesive society, by discouraging perverse, contrary or abusive behavior—or so the censors would have us believe. The question is whether censorship, by repressing disagreeable ideas and images, actually removes them or merely forces them underground, blunting public awareness of their underlying causes.

This raises the ongoing charges of sexism and the degradation of women in the media, and how to deal with it. Some feminists, among them Michelle Landsberg and Maude Barlow, would like to sanction the state to censor and ban films and videos they disapprove of. However, the history of censorship shows that it has never worked to make society more liberal or more understanding; on the contrary, censorship has all too often resulted in the abuse of its powers at the expense of various minorities (homosexuals, feminists, religious and cultural minorities, for example).

"Instead of fighting to protect their own voice and their right to be heard," writes Sue Stewart in the *Forbidden Films Journal*, "[feminists advocating censorship] are fighting to deprive their oppressors of their right to speak against them."

There are alternative ways of dealing with sexist and degrading images of women; ways that do not infringe on the civil rights of others. Feminists, for example, can attempt to raise the consciousness of the public regarding the exploitative nature of pornography, as well as the political basis (in 'patriarchal' society) of sexual stereotypes.

In a more positive way, some feminists are beginning to produce 'healthy' forms of eroticism that advocate consensual sex of a nature that does not degrade or exploit. This eroticism could counterbalance 'negative' pornography; in its self-assertive ways this strategy could also be very helpful to the homosexual community, whereas censorship would likely stifle any such progress.

Many feminists now see mainstream sexual expression as supporting the status quo by implicitly or explicitly working for "a homogeneous patriarchal elite populated by young (or youthful), strong, comely, dominant males," at the expense of women, non-whites, the old, the ugly and the poor.

The Ontario Censor Board has banned over 100 films in the past two years. It also frequently cuts films so extensively as to ruin their continuity.

Other provincial censor boards exercise their craft with greater restraint. Manitoba's Film Classification Board does not ban films at all.

The BC board, in addition to classifying films into the categories of "General," "Mature" (14 years and over), and "Restricted entry" (18 or with adult), provides tags such as "Frequent coarse language," "Nudity and suggestive scenes," and "Occasional frightening and violent scenes." It has banned a total of five films in the past two years.

OFAVAS, whose advisory board includes Pierre Berton, Laura Sabia, and York professor and film critic Robin Wood, believes that the current function of the censor board should be replaced by a film classification system that would, like the BC board, promote education and awareness of the content of films, but would not have the power to ban or censor. They feel it would be more appropriate to let citizens decide for themselves.

Only in objectionable circumstances would charges be laid under the obscenity section of the Criminal Code.

We will certainly see more debate on this topic when the Ontario Censor Board appeals the provincial court's decision on its constitutionality, with the Supreme Court of Canada.

The decisions that lie ahead seem to revolve around two poles of thought. One of these would grant censors a power that could be abused all the more in this, the dawning of the video era.

The other view proposes a freedom that could easily lead to forms of expression many people might find disagreeable. However, coupled with education and public awareness, this freedom of expression is the only alternative that could lead to a more healthy, aware and diverse society.