



Watch on censorship

Annabelle Sheehan reports on the *Bloodlust and Discord* seminar, held August 9-10, Australian Film, Television and Radio School

Watch on Censorship have a high tolerance and high regard for screen violence. It is a heightened, paroxysmic form of entertainment. I love what I call the cinema of sensation, the cinema of shocks and jolts and attraction, visceral cinema, kinetic cinema...To show violence does not necessarily condone it. So many violent films are in fact pitiless exercises in a kind of apocalyptic despair. They deliberately take the spectacle of violence, especially male violence, to a point of exhaustion, of emptiness and waste, they are not about heroism but the ruin of heroism" – Adrian Martin, *Age* film critic, keynote address.

The AFTRS Screen Violence weekend was designed to explore a range of issues associated with producing, classifying and watching violence on the screen. It brought together producers, scriptwriters, production designers, academics, censors, critics and bureaucrats. This article summarises issues raised in one of the six sessions that took place that weekend.

Shifting debate

The violence debate is shifting and expanding. Moral panic is driving the debate further into the legislative realm. The banning of *Tras El Cristal* and near banning of *Salo* have influenced the formation of Watch on Censorship and a growing concern that these scuffles are the thin end of the wedge in what could become a more concerted attack on free speech. The notion of an equation between violence on the screen and violence in the streets is creating renewed interest in statistics on both sides of the debate.

As Adrian Martin put it in his keynote address to the seminar, some commentators are caught between adjudicating 'the grim certainties of high moralism or the vacuum sealed satisfactions of pure sensation'. All commentators are debating the question of whether screen violence educates, inspires, corrupts, desensitises or provides catharsis. They are forced to 'do the splits' when it comes to taking a stand. This uncomfortable position provides us with few options from which to move forward.

The classification system creates viewing patterns in young audiences that privilege mainstream American cinema.

At one end of the debate there is a concern for free speech, which is mobilised when a film is deemed beyond 'R' and therefore banned or cut. At the other end there is scrutiny of the classification systems from G through to R. Those who wish to regulate, to claim the link between the screen and the real – predominantly conservative forces – are working both ends of the debate. With 551 films classified in the 1995/6 period and 2 refused classification, it is clear that classification, not banning, is where all the action is on a daily basis. It appears that aspects of the free speech debate could have further evidence if applied to G through R classification issues and if so it is important to draw out the basis for that shift, have further relevance if applied to G through R classification issues and if so it is important to draw out the basis for that shift.

Classification

At the AFTRS Screen Violence Weekend the debate around classification and censorship was chaired by the Communications Law Centre's Jock Given, and panellists were John Dickie, Director of the Office of Film and Literature Classification (OFLC), Rebecca Huntley from Watch on Censorship and Hong Kong filmmaker Ronnie Yu.

Dickie described the G, PG, M, MA and R range of the classification system as being designed to give consumer advice, which is driven predominantly by notions of child protection. Clearly the G to R range does not affect adult choices and so those looking after free speech have until now mainly concerned themselves with the 'ban it' end of the spectrum.

Implicit in the concerns about the term 'gratuitous' is the notion that the OFLC's classification system creates a standard of 'normality' that is flawed.

Watch on Censorship's Rebecca Huntley agrees that in her association's short history its main focus has been to scrutinise and lobby against the potential banning of a number of films. This 'free speech' end of the debate would seem easy to mount but in fact the rise in moral panic has been channelled into a fairly powerful Senate Select Committee on Community Standards, whose eye on sex and violence and whose desire to control and legislate access to a growing range of private screen spaces is of concern to Watch on Censorship. Huntley indicated that Watch on Cen-



sorship is developing responses to other issues such as the Senate Select Committee's interest in regulating violent video games.

While questions of freedom of speech give a strong philosophical accent to the debate, the role of classification in film marketing brings it all back to the tin tacks of economics. Marketing puts another complexion on the regulation of screen expression. 64% (2 out of 3) of the top 50 films of all time from all countries at the Australian box office up to May 1996 (*Get the Picture* 4th ed. AFC 1996) were PG or G. This information suggests that a useful study could be made of the correlation between classification and profits.

Producers' imperatives

Hong Kong filmmaker Ronnie Yu distilled this aspect of the debate in his discussion of the making of his last film *Warriors of Virtue* (1997). Put very simply, one of the producers was a toy maker, the other MGM. The toymaker wanted a PG rating to ensure an opening in the toy market, whereas MGM wanted an M rating to ensure a different market share. This meant Ronnie Yu's direction of action and violence was affected by these two different classification options that producers were interested in. Pulling and pushing punches in anticipation of a debate over classification made for interesting filmmaking. Further, Yu confirmed the comments of distributors at the 1997 Sydney Film Festival Censorship debate in noting that different classification boards around the world ask for different cuts in his films or different classifications. Clearly violence classifications can be culturally specific. The high moral ground shifts on a global scale.

One of the main points emerging out of the discussions at the seminar that clearly shifted the screen violence debate further into the realms

of classification as opposed to censorship was the issue of defining the terms used by the OFLC such as 'gratuitous'. Jane Mills (Head of Screen Studies, AFTRS) and Adrian Martin were concerned to point out to John Dickie that the OFLC's use of the term 'gratuitous' was privileging certain kinds of narrative cinema, while working against other cinemas where narrative drive is not necessarily as central to them. Martin noted that certain genres (for instance, horror and kick-boxing films) depend on gratuitous violence.

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Jane Mills suggested that the OFLC's ability to influence cuts for changes in classification means that they are part of the filmmaking process, and should acknowledge that. Furthermore, for her, classification is censorship. But are we to blame the OFLC or the distributors who agree to cut to ensure a rating in the toy buyer niche (G and PG)? Is there a sudden concern for the profits of large conglomerates such as Warners Bros and MGM?

Does mere classification matter?

If questions of free speech are going to shift into the area of G through R classifications it is important to ask why and to what end. If we are interested in free speech, why do we care about classifications which affect access to under 18s but not the circulation of the product? The answer could be that the classification system creates viewing patterns in young audiences that privilege mainstream American cinema. This needs to be debated.

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tem creates a standard of 'normality' that is flawed. Rebecca Huntley added that the underlying philosophy of the OFLC decision making was based on a notion of the 'reasonable person'. Huntley states "this is the a problem for queer cinema which is not about what the 'reasonable' person wants to see. It is about being oppositional". This view was previously canvassed in a slightly different way by Dendy Films' Lynn McCarthy at the 1997 Sydney Film Festival Forum on Classification when she noted that *Hollow Reed* and *Beautiful Thing* were given MA ratings despite having very little sex violence. She proposed that films dealing with gay issues or the subject of child abuse were given higher classifications.

In fact if there are anomalies in the classification system it might be that they allow too much violence in general categories whilst sex or coarse language are scrutinised more closely. Where a violent Batman film sits on a PG because its insistent destruction is 'stylised and theatrical', a relationship film about key issues of social interest but with 'discrete sexual references' and 'infrequent crude language' might have to contend with an MA rating.

For the moralists pushing the OFLC at the PG end of the system, their concern with 'morality' seems to be proposing that violence is better than sex and words are worse than weapons. This is of key concern to parents interested in free speech but actively, daily, weighing up how much of a dose of the culture of destruction and despair they should treat their under 12s to.

If we are to truly investigate issues of the marginalisation of difference, the valorisation of normality, the culture of despair, the protection of children's visions and the maintenance of free speech, we cannot allow the debate to be blocked by the polarising terms of moralising or sensation. ■