In the realm of the censors

Paul Byrnes, director of the Sydney Film Festival and member of Watch on Censorship.

In January last year new legislation came into effect governing censorship across Australia. At the time, the chief censor John Dickie, now called the Director of the Office of Film and Literature Classification, said this would bring a new certainty to the classification process. He was right in one sense, but he and I disagree about what that certainty is.

To me, it is certain that we are now returning to the dark ages of the 1950s and 1960s in the climate of censorship in Australia. These were the days when the Censor regularly cut scenes from films without telling the public; when an on-screen kiss would be routinelytrimmed because the Censor thought it 'embarrassing' for your young fella at the pictures with his young lady if a kiss went on too long; when films by serious artists like Roberto Rossellini were banned or mutilated because the Pope and the Catholic Church objected to them.

Recent developments

If you think I'm overstating the comparison consider these recent developments:

- **Dead Man**, a film by Jim Jarmusch, one of the most highly respected independent directors in the US, was banned here last year because of a four second scene which used sexual coercion to suggest the brutality of a frontier town in the Old West. Nowhere else in the world did the film have a problem with that scene.
- Spanish film **Tras El Cristal** was banned from the 1995 Queer Screen festival, again because of sexual violence, the first time the Censor had done that to a festival in over a decade. This is despite the fact that the legislation governing festivals requires attendees to be at least 18 years of age.
- **The Hunchback of Notre Dame**, a Disney animated feature, was initially classified PG, because of 'an atmosphere of threat and menace' – a disaster for a film aimed at children. What happened? It was then cut by its distributor to obtain a G-rating, one of several films last year which were shown here in cut versions. Again, the public was not informed by either the censor or the distributor of the extent of the cuts – or even that there were cuts. The cryogenically preserved Walt Disney must have...
been turning in his refrigerator.

• *Shine*, perhaps the most uniformly praised Australian film of the last year, was originally classified M, because the censors thought the scenes of the father abusing the teenage David Helfgott, played by Noah Taylor, would upset young audiences. When the distributor appealed that decision, they won a PG rating, but not in all states. Western Australia still wanted it rated M, a situation only resolved when the distributor appealed directly to the relevant minister in Perth.

• Ronin Films recently had a problem with a 30 minute educational video, *Period Piece*, an American program aimed at demystifying menstruation for young girls in the 10-14 age bracket. The censors gave it an M – which rather defeated the purpose, because most 15 year old girls no longer need menstruation demystified. This was despite a slew of recommendations from educationalists in the US endorsing the film for the target age group. As with *Dead Man*, the original decision was overturned on appeal, but those two decisions alone speak volumes about the standards being routinely applied in day-to-day classifications within the OFLC.

Mr Dickie, at the behest of Canberra, has presided over a major tightening of the categories in the last four to five years – especially after Paul Keating made it clear he didn’t like what his kids were able to watch on primetime television. What were they watching, I’ve always wondered – parliamentary Question Time?

**Bracket creep**

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Keating’s displeasure gave us the MA category, but even that was not enough. Changes to the way the censors judge each category came into effect last year, and Mr Dickie has said that films with a high level of violence previously classified R, would now be banned. That would include films like *Pulp Fiction* and *Seven*, both of which were rated R with an advisory for high level violence. Mr Dickie has said publicly that a film like Pasolini’s *Salo*, which was finally released here only a few years ago after twenty years on the banned list, would probably not be passed if it were submitted now. The same applies to one of the most celebrated and popular films of the early 1970s, *Straw Dogs*. Films with violence in lower categories can expect higher ratings under the new guidelines. These new guidelines predate the Port Arthur massacre – the process has been going on for a while now, but not, as far as I can tell, because of a radical hardening of the general public’s attitudes towards censorship. When were we ever consulted about the need for new guidelines? Where’s the evidence?

**Lyons at the gate**

But however much I disagree with some of the OFLC’s ludicrous decisions, I have been forced by recent developments outside the OFLC to think they are not so bad as the alternative. In its first year in office, the Howard government has caved in to the likes of Senator Brian Harradine and the ultra conservatives within its own ranks, on matters of censorship. Let’s check the record:
• this is the government which set up a Committee of Ministers after the Port Arthur massacre, to inquire into the portrayal of violence in the media, then gave them six weeks to examine the available evidence. Social scientists have endeavoured for about the last fifty years to understand the complexities of this topic, without discovering conclusive evidence of causality, but these ministers found it in a jiffy, and we got the V-chip as the answer, a device that further undermines the authority and the necessity for parents to supervise what their children are watching.

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• we also got a review of the appointments procedure to the Film Classification Board of the OFLC – an effective, if not very subtle, way of intimidating whatever forces of moderation still exist there.

• Senator Alston, federal Minister for the Arts, also foreshadowed the need for input from what he called the 'heartland'. This has now come to pass in the form of 'Community Advisory Panels' to act as a watchdogs on the OFLC – or, if you prefer Daryl Williams' words, 'auditors'. Ordinary people who will 'keep the board on its toes', by which I take it he actually means, the back foot.

• In recent weeks, the notoriously conservative Senate Select Committee on Community Standards released its report on the portrayal of violence in the electronic media. Amongst other things, it recommends that disturbing news footage should only be shown in later news bulletins. In other words, as Mackenzie Wark pointed out (Australian, March 17), 'the committee believes it is right to censor the news and deny people access to information about what happens in the world because it might be unpleasant!'

Senate Select Committee

This committee, which comprises Senators Tierney, Harradine, McGauran, Knowles, Denman, Troeth, Woddley, Reynolds, and only recently Senator Stott-Despoja, also suggested that films with more violence be charged more for classification by the censors, an idea as unworkable as it is unfair. These fees have already risen enormously in recent years – it now costs $1000 to appeal a decision of the OFLC, after the initial fee for classification – which means justice only for those who can afford it.

Lest you think that this committee is some irrelevant backwater designed to keep the good Senators occupied, think again. This committee has already succeeded in blocking R rated material from Pay TV, despite the fact that two surveys, one by the ABA and another by the Bureau of Statistics, have shown that about 80 per cent of Australians are in favour of its allowance. The Select Committee is also responsible for the fact that there is no R classification for computer games in Australia: the highest we adults are allowed to see are games rated MA. Above that, they're banned. The idea for the new Community Access Panels is also one of their brain-waves and the X rated mail order business is sure to become a target soon – again, despite several surveys conducted over the past decade which say a majority of Australians want an X category to be available.

State control

These moves go far beyond the pretence that censorship should only be about protecting children from potentially harmful visual and written material. These people have never subscribed to such namby-pamby 'small L liberal' ideas anyway. These measures are about the state seizing control once again of the means of expression – they are about the reassertion of the idea of 'approved culture' with the government holding the approval stamp. Ultimately, they are about managing dissent and placating those in the community who feel an acute sense of moral panic about the way in which the world is changing.

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Worse still, all of this is happening without so much as a whimper of protest. It's as if the whole country has swallowed the line that you are what you watch, and what we're watching is killing us, or turning us into killers like Martin Bryant. Policy on censorship has been captured by a 'deranged mind' model and the breathtakingly simplistic idea that we could have prevented the Port Arthur or Hoddle Street massacres by the banning of this or that video. If you read the new National Classification Code, which sets out the criteria under which the OFLC operates, the first principle is this: 'adults should be able to read, hear and see what they want'. Given the current climate for censorship in Australia, I have to see this as a kind of bad Orwellian joke. It's time for those who do not believe in this new tide to stand up and say so. ⊙