CENSORSHIP AND PUBLIC OPINION

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I agree with censorship. After all, I made a fortune out of it—Mae West.

IN THE AWARD-WINNING MOTION PICTURE, DANCES WITH WOLVES, THERE IS A very sensitive scene which shows a middle-aged Indian couple, wake-up and quietly make love beside a much younger and wide-awake squaw. As the camera pans back, we see that this scene is being enacted amongst fifteen or twenty other sleeping members of the tribe including grandparents and children. This scene says something about our roots!

We have a long history of making love in the company of others. Three and a half million years ago on the plains of what is now Ethiopia, our hominid ancestors were bending over each other from behind and grunting and groaning in full view of the campfire and the tribe. Viewed objectively, the modern practise of a single couple retiring by themselves to an empty and often darkened bedroom to engage in meaningful interface could be seen as a new development. With this in mind, the idea of sharing the living room with actors and actresses in an X-rated movie may involve some ancient behaviour patterns.

Indeed the history of sexual depiction is a long and celebrated one. Sexually explicit drawings and the world's first dildo, dating back to the Ice Age, have been found in Europe (Gordon 1980, p. 304). Detailed clay drawings of sexual intercourse were found during the excavation of the ancient Babylonian city of Ur (Gebhard 1970, p. 109) and the ancient Vedic civilisation of India gave us the Kama Sutra.

One of China's oldest manuscripts, The Golden Lotus, contains many explicit sexual passages. The ancient Greeks and Romans were famous for their ceramic works which depicted explicit sex acts including homosexuality and group sex (Brendle 1970, p. 109).

In 1832 Louis Daguerre invented the photographic process and immediately the erotic French Postcard evolved. As the motion picture industry developed in the early 1900s, sexually-explicit films incorporating state of the art graphics and equipment were some of the first. Between 1915 and 1920, two sexually-explicit films—A Free Ride and The Casting Couch—were made.

Of the world's six or seven main religions, the two largest—Christianity and Islam—take the greatest exception and apply the most severe censorship to depictions of non-violent adult sexuality. Punishments for dissemination range from eternal damnation in the afterlife, through to being stoned to death in this life. Both religions take sex very seriously and have
devoted many pages of their own religious texts to outlining what they see as proper sexual conduct. Christians have built two anti-sex pillars into the fabric of their religion—the celibate priesthood and the Virgin Mary.

In comparison with other world religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism, Christianity and Islam appear negatively preoccupied with sex. Buddhism and Hinduism, on the other hand, actually embrace sexuality as one path to liberation and a useful tool for changing consciousness. These religions also involve female deities or spirits in their godhead, whereas Christianity is still agonising over whether to admit female clergy into its mortal ranks—some thousands of years after its inception. Islam appears so chauvinistic in its approach that, in most countries, its clergy are not even allowed to touch or look at women. The patriarchal nature of these two strongly anti-sex religions is mirrored by their strong militant nature. The Christians and Moslems have been waging 'holy wars' and crusades for centuries.

As the major religion of the Western world, Christianity is philosophically locked into a negative view of non-violent adult sexual depictions. This is wonderfully summed up by St Paul's famous admonition 'To be carnally-minded is death' (Romans). This hysterical reaction to sexuality is a direct result of the Church's longstanding equation of sex with guilt. This has translated into censorship for a long time. For example, not long after Michaelangelo completed his statue of David, the church put the obligatory fig leaf in place where it stayed until the 20th century.

Because the act of sexual union, at its best, involves depictions of true equality, these are seen as weakening to the patriarchal and militant approach. Indeed, the power of orgasm is seen by some theologians as an alternative to the power of God and therefore to be avoided as much as possible. Without this push from the Christian church, the western world would have very little censorship on sexually-explicit material and a whole lot more on violence.

Where sexual and moral matters are concerned, politicians are extremely susceptible to the power of the church—even when there is a complete and demonstrable lack of public support for increased censorship. This was graphically illustrated in 1984 when the Reverend Fred Nile and the British morals campaigner, Mary Whitehouse, took in a lightning tour to all state Premiers. Within a very short space of time, they managed to persuade each Premier to ban the sale of non-violent, adult, sexually-explicit films and videos.

Public opinion, however, did not support these bans. From December 1984, a series of national polls conducted by the Adult Video Industry Association showed that the Premiers had acted without mandate. When asked the question 'Do you think that sales of non-violent, sexually-explicit films and videos should be banned'?, a Morgan poll in 1984 showed 66 per cent said 'no'. In 1985 a McNair Poll showed 63 per cent said 'no'. In 1986 another Morgan Poll showed 72 per cent said 'no'. In 1987 yet another Morgan Poll showed 77 per cent said 'no'. In 1988 a Saulwick poll showed 97 per cent said 'no'. State polling on the same issue in 1987 by the Morgan organisation showed an average 73 per cent support for depictions of non-violent explicit erotica (AVIA Survey Results April 1989). In April 1991, a Morgan poll in Queensland found 80 per cent of the people were against bans on non-violent erotic books and magazines.

Across the Pacific, national public opinion polls in the United States of America between 1965 and 1987 show an intense minority of 4 to 7 per cent of the population believe explicit sexual imagery is a threat to society. When rated on a harm scale, this minority consistently saw it as more threatening than economic and environmental problems and even more serious than nuclear war. When asked what they saw as a suitable punishment for selling sexually-explicit material, a majority of these people recommended
castration, beheading, standard death penalty and even dismemberment (McConahay 1988)!

That this small and fanatical minority continue to wield such disproportionate power in the political arena is an indication of the immature grasp on moral and sexual issues that many western politicians have—possibly this is an admission by some of their own sexual guilt and confusion. The censorship of explicit sexual imagery will be difficult and problematic for politicians as long as adults continue to make love to each other. One simply cannot ban depictions of such a universal activity. It is like trying to ban depictions of breathing or eating!

In Australia we already have approximately four million non-violent erotic (X-rated) videos in circulation. Any future bans on the sale of this product from the ACT will simply force the product underground and into the hands of blackmarket operators who may also be dealing in drugs, stolen property and other contraband. Trying to ban material in such obvious demand makes criminals out of ordinary citizens and robs the rest of society through misplaced law enforcement.

When we look at the classification system that is used for film and video in Australia we find some strange and distressing features. At the top of the list is the only totally non-violent category of films—the classification, non-violent erotic X—though G-rated cartoons are allowed a modicum of violence. The next classification is extreme and relished depictions of violence or R-rated.

Who sets this agenda for classification? One must ask, is consenting, non-violent adult explicit sexual depictions more or less offensive than violent scenes of someone having their head blown off with a shotgun? Essentially, what all state and Federal Attorneys-General are saying to their constituents is that 'I think sex is worse than violence'.

But on the issue of censorship, the state Attorneys-General have a lot to answer for. From the many discussions that have been held with their offices after they had collectively decided to pressure the Federal Attorney-General to ban X-rated videos in 1988, it was obvious that most of the Attorneys-General and their advisers were confused as to what was X-rated and what was R-rated. For example, Peter Dowding, Premier of Western Australia in 1989, convened a special Cabinet luncheon to view X-rated videos. He told the West Australian newspaper that 'the violence in the videos turned me off my lunch' (West Australian, 22 March 1989). Clearly, he made his decision to ban X-rated, non-violent erotic videos, after being shown an R-rated 'slaughter' video.

Politicians are notoriously fickle under pressure from moral groups. In August 1989, whilst in Opposition in Queensland, the Labor Justice spokesman, Dean Wells, accused the Queensland State Library of censorship for shredding copies of erotic photographer, Robert Maplethorpe's book. He told reporters: The destruction of books was supposed to have gone out with the Dark Ages (The Canberra Times, 12 August 1989). In April 1991, the Attorney-General of Queensland, Dean Wells, voted along with all his other Cabinet members to ban the sale of all Category 1 and 2 non-violent erotic books. This ban included one-third of the Queensland Family Planning Association's booklist.

In early March 1989, John Howard, the then Leader of the Opposition, told the House of Representatives during a debate on Salmon Rushdie's book 'It means that we do not start banning books even though they may be offensive to segments of our community'. However, Liberal Senator Shirley Walters was at that same time preparing a Private Members Bill to ban non-violent erotic videos because they were offensive to some members of the community.

If we go to those who act on the censorship boards and ask them what they consider to be more offensive—explicit sex or violence—it can be anticipated that they will say 'violence' every time. This is not to say that we should have an open slather approach to sexually explicit films.
Not long ago, those in the X-rated industry made overtures to the Chief Censor's office to take defecation films off the X-rated list and into the banned category. Those explicit films which, whilst not showing any violence, do depict an incredibly sexist and yobbo approach to lovemaking should be taken out of the system. However, to be consistent, the sexist and yobbo depictions of mindless violence in M- and R-rated films should be taken out as well. But that would involve an act of censorship so great that we would lose nearly 25 per cent of our current video list. We must find other ways of educating X-rated film producers and buyers to avoid the sexist and the trashy end of the market.

Censorship is a process which erodes the fabric of democracies. Apart from the censorship of certain acts of violence such as child pornography, heavy sadomasochism and possibly bestiality, non-violent acts, art, philosophies or lifestyles should not be censored.

Without censorship on alcohol, Al Capone would never have become the crime boss he was. Without censorship on heroin, AIDS possibly would not have infected as many people as it has. Without censorship of the media, Hitler and Stalin could never have manipulated nations the way they did. Without the censorship of information, the victims of Chernobyl may have been able to escape a disaster.

References

Adult Video Industry Association 1989, Survey Results April, AVIA.


