

The latest in censorship trends

Few organisations are escaping the long reach of the Office of Film and Literature Classification in its further attempts to oversee Australian morals

The banning of Pier Paolo Pasolini's film *Salo* is only the latest in a list of reviews and kneejerk attempts to tighten censorship guidelines, increase taxes and fees and monitor possible abuses of the classification laws. As our moral elders take our physical and mental wellbeing into their weighty consideration, it seems that the volume of change is beginning to exceed the need for reaction.

Publication guidelines

The first thing on the agenda of the censors are the current classification guidelines for publications, now under review. In particular, it seems that the genuine artistic merit exception relating to unrestricted publications (which allows the depiction of explicit sexual activity if seen in an historical or cultural context) could be removed.

Under current guidelines, unrestricted publications may depict discreet nudity if it is not overtly sexually suggestive and may contain some lower level coarse language. But unrestricted publications may not depict:

- genitals, pubic hair, fetishes, or implications of fetishes;
- assaultative or sexually suggestive language; or
- sexually suggestive combinations of words or colloquialisms for sexual acts or genitals.

OFLC Community Liaison Officer to stay

Aside from the publication guidelines, it appears that the Office of Film and Literature Classification's (OFLC) experiment with a Community Liaison Officer (CLO) is likely to become entrenched. The position is described by the office as one which "helps traders to understand their obligations under the law". But David Haines, former deputy chief-censor turned adult film-maker, argues that the CLO will in reality act as "an informant reporting breaches to the local enforcement agencies".

Classification fees

With regards to films and videos, a new tax is being considered by the federal parliament. The bill was presented to the House of Representatives at the end of last session and will be debated in the Senate later in the year.

Robby Swan of the Eros Foundation argues that the new tax does not encourage compliance by the industry and is easily evaded. He says that the new tax will punish those, particularly in the sex industry, who dutifully submitted their product for classification.

The new tax was designed by an independent consultant contracted by the federal Attorney General's department. It is part of the federal government's attempt to make the OFLC self-sustaining. This proposed tax comes fast on the heels of the recent fee increases for film and video classification. When the classification legislation came into force on January 1, 1996, it was decided that the OFLC's budget would be

reduced by \$2 million dollars. The reassessment of fee levels was made to ensure that the OFLC would be able to earn an equivalent additional amount from classification fees.

Censorship at your ABC

On February 6, 1998, the Radio National program *Artstoday* was taken off air because it contained "offensive language". The program, due to air at 10am, included a public forum "Questioning the Queer Aesthetic", during which panellists discussed a short film called *My Cunt*, which featured at the 1997 Gay and Lesbian Film Festival in Melbourne. (Interestingly, *My Cunt* was almost unable to be screened at the Festival because the post-production house refused to edit the film on account of its language.) But due to complaints from the public and some ABC staff about the decision, the ABC's head of national networks, Andy Lloyd James, made the decision to reinstate the program some time soon.

Since the February 6 incident, other examples of censorship by ABC executives have surfaced. A short Australian film by Sydney film producer Helen Bowden, *Shooting the Breeze*, was apparently pulled from ABC television in January last year. The eight-minute film, which was nominated for a Film Critics Circle award at the 1997 Sundance Film Festival, was allegedly removed on account of the film's emotional climax in which a woman calls a man a "cunt". But the ABC has informed the film-maker that it is planning to screen *Shooting the Breeze* during 1998. There have also been staff allegations that an afternoon book reading of Mark Ravenhill's *Shopping and Fucking* was withdrawn from air late last year because it contained offensive language.

In a comment to the *Sydney Morning Herald*, Mr Lloyd James stated that the ABC has guidelines to follow and that "four-letter words are not standard fare on ABC radio or television".

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Salo banned – again

As of February 17, 1998, Pier Paolo Pasolini's last film *Salo: 120 Days of Sodom* was no longer able to be screened in cinemas in Australia. *Salo* was banned in this country in 1977 and was granted an R-classification by the then Film and Literature Board of Review in 1994.

The banning is a result of a formal application by federal Attorney-General Daryl Williams at the request of his Queensland counterpart, Denver Beanland, to reclassify the film. The Classification Review Board decided to overturn the decision of the Classification Board in June 1997 to maintain *Salo's* R-rating.

In a press release on the day of its decision, the Review Board's convenor Barbara Biggins stated that the board members assessed *Salo* against the National Classification Code and the Guidelines and found that the film failed to meet the criteria for an R18+ classification. Instead, the board decided *Salo* warranted an RC (Refused Classification) which the Guidelines describe as a film which includes any of the following:

- depictions of child sexual abuse, bestiality, sexual acts accompanied by offensive fetishes, or exploitative incest fantasies;
- unduly detailed and/or relished acts of extreme violence or cruelty;
- explicit or unjustifiable depictions of sexual violence against non-consenting persons.

Biggins stated that a detailed statement of reasons for the decision will be issued in due course.

Rebecca Huntley

(Thanks go to Pilita Clark, David Haines and David Marr. Watch on Censorship can be contacted via PO Box 950, Glebe, NSW 2037. Tel: 02 9660 3844, fax: 02 9692 8793)

Conference Diary Dates

March and April 1998

18 & 9 March

Screen Producers Association of Australia, *TV & Film Australia, the Asia Pacific Production Show, conference and exhibition*, Sydney Convention Centre, Darling Harbour. Speakers include John Polson, director of Tropfest; Iain Fairweather of XYZ Entertainment; Ian Hogg, the Becker Group; and Sandra Levy, executive producer at Southern Star. Cost: Conference Pass, \$350; Day 1 Only Pass, \$195; Day 2 Only Pass, \$195. Entry to the exhibition is free. Contact: Meagan Benson, Festival Coordinator or Alison Nolan, Festival Director, tel (02) 9360 6396, fax (02) 9360 7654, home page <http://www.dmw.com.au>

24 March

The Sydney Institute, *Inside Media Watch*, The Chifley Conference Room (Rm 102), Level 1, 2 Chifley Square, Sydney, 5.30pm for 6.00pm. Speaker is David Salter, former producer of the ABC's *Media Watch* television program.

26 & 27 March

Institute for International Research (IIR), *Payphones & Phonecards International Summit 1998*, Hotel Nikko, Hongkong. Subjects covered will include new products, the latest technologies and best security systems. Speakers drawn from companies including BT Payphones, U.K.; Hongkong Telecom; Nokia, Finland; MTN South Africa; Telstra, Australia; Siemens Components; T&C Technologies, Singapore; PTT Telecom, The Netherlands; and Anritsu Corp., Japan. Cost: 2-day conference, US\$1,795. Contact: IIR, tel (+852) 2586 1777, fax (+852) 2507 5666, e-mail customersvc@iir.com.hk

31 March & 1, 2 April

Institute for International Research (IIR), *Mobiles '98*, Forum The Grace Hotel, Sydney. Topics include policy and regulation, marketing and business opportunities, technology choices and emerging mobiles technology. Speakers include Alan Horsley, managing director of ATUG; Dick Johnson, chairman of the Telecommunications Access Forum; and Jane Forster, partner, Clayton Utz. Companies taking part include Motorola, Siemens, Telstra, Optus Communications, Century 21, Iridium and Gemplus Technology Asia Pacific. Cost: any 2 days, \$1,795; all 3 days, \$2,395. Contact: IIR, tel (02) 9954 5844, fax (02) 9959 4684, e-mail iir@ozemail.com.au

1 & 3 April

Business Law Education Centre, *CyberLaw*. One day seminar, April 1 at the Sydney Hilton, April 3 at the Hilton on the Park in Melbourne. Issues include the rise of e-commerce, taxation, security and privacy concerns, cross-border disputes and the future of CyberLaw. Speakers drawn from companies including Baker & McKenzie, Gilbert & Tobin, Clayton Utz, Rigby Cooke, Simpsons Solicitors and LawNet. Cost: \$895. Contact: BLEC Customer Service, tel (02) 9210 5777, or fax (02) 9221 7773.

6 & 7 April

IBC conferences, *Internet Telephony '98*, The Millenium Hotel, Sydney. Presentations from companies including Cisco Systems Australia, Ericsson Australia, Lucent Technologies, Nokia Communications, Ozemail, Telecom New Zealand, Vodafone Australia and www.consult.com.au. Cost: 2 day conference, \$1,795. Contact: IBC, tel (02) 9319 3755, fax (02) 9699 3901, e-mail enquiries@ibcoz.com.au