

Jane Mills

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The debate on censorship and violence in the media just won't go away. Articles continue to appear in the press, media columnists have offered a range of opinions, and late last year film reviewer Peter Thompson did a story on the issue for the Sunday program on the Nine Network. Late in December, usually a dead time for government releases, Federal Attorney General Daryl Williams announced the establishment of Community Assessment Panels, which could 'ensure classifications decisions reflect the standards of the broader Australian community.' The panels are to provide classification and consumer advice on films, videos, video games and literature examined by the Classification Board of the Office of Film and Literature Classification, but would not have the power to overrule the board's decisions. The board will, however, be expected to take the views of the Community Assessment Panels into serious consideration and State and Territory censorship ministers have agreed in principle to this new plan.

The Attorney General also announced a review of the mechanics of selecting members for the Classification Board, to ensure that 'their backgrounds and qualifications reflect the diverse composition of the Australian community', and expected that the results of the review would be available for the next round of Board appointments in July this year.

Both of these decisions flow from recommendations made by a ministerial committee on the portrayal of violence set up by the Prime Minister after the Port Arthur massacre; it's yet another example of the government being seen to 'do something', no matter how unlikely these actions are to have any effect on manifestations of violence.

All this makes Jane Mills' article on censorship and screen violence even more timely. This article was developed from a paper presented at a Press Council seminar held at Parliament House in Sydney on 12 September; 1996.

I recently found myself recalling the long aeroplane journey which brought me to Australia just over 18 months ago: the soporific atmosphere; the infantilisation induced by the strict, regular feeding hours; the bland, edited movies making even the in-flight magazine seem exciting; the lack of any meaningful discourse with fellow passengers; the certainty that if anything really significant happened on the ground I wouldn't be told -and even if I was, what the heck! There was nothing I could do about it.

Twenty-four hours of passivity, unreality, no involvement, and no responsibility; isolated time away from any significant cultural involvement, a day and night out from the democratic process.

The cocooned, mindless, infantilising aeroplane atmosphere provides me with a perfect analogy for the post-Thatcherite nanny-state of Tory Britain where increasing censorship and media oligopolies make it impossible for adults to read, hear and see what they want.

The focus on censorship in the UK right now is, as it is here, on screen violence. Like here, like the USA, the violent crime rates have remained stable over the past decade. But no matter, it is already impossible to rent *Reservoir Dogs* and any number of other videos in the UK because of an unproven belief that films and television cause violence.

As I left, the Liberal Democrat MP David Alton was proposing new legislation to ban videos 'containing degrading or gratuitously violent scenes liable to cause psychological damage to a child, or present a child with an inappropriate role model.' This last could lead to many absurdities. 'For who,' as John Walker asks in his introduction to Halliwell's *Film Guide*, 'would want *Citizen Kane* as a role model?' Walker also provides a useful historical perspective.

...there is little doubt that video has become the latest scapegoat of public concerns about violence in society as, in the past, have cheap newspapers, music hall, jazz, rock 'n' roll, and horror comics. Indeed, government dislike of popular culture goes back more than 400 years, to laws compelling the licensing of wandering performers, who were similarly blamed for spreading disorder and dissension.

One factor which make governments single out popular culture products is that what they really dislike and distrust -and want to control -are the masses, the populace that consumes and enjoys popular culture.

While many artists in this postmodern age are hell-bent on blurring the boundaries between high culture and low culture, the recent Australian guidelines and proposed legislation aimed at further restricting what we read, see and hear, reveal a Government determined to preserve the distinction. And there appears to be a high degree of passivity and a greater acceptance of this distinction among the Australian people, if the polls are anything to go by.

The polls, incidentally, may not be anything to go by. There is a strong suspicion among psephologists that those who tell the pollsters there should be less screen violence are the very same who queue up for the latest Hollywood violent blockbuster, who rent the MA and R-rated videos, and who use the Internet for a bit of vicarious violent pleasure.

The Office of Film and Literature Classification came to a similar conclusion: while many people in their recent survey held concerns about violence in relation to film and video, and an overwhelming 91 percent felt there should be more enforcement of age restrictions on R-rated films, only 4 percent actually disapproved of the violence they had seen in a recent film.

What is it about popular culture, especially the visual, that so frightens us? It's as if we're caught in the grip of scopophobia. And like all phobias, there is not, necessarily, any rationality involved. If it's written or literary and appeals to a relatively small number of people, then it's high art and acceptable. But if it's visual and popular, then it's probably low art and dangerous.

Perhaps what most concerns Governments and other bodies who claim to speak for us all is that the great 'unwashed' actually like it. It's impossible to ignore the issues of power and control - behind which, I suspect, lurks a fear of the *mobilis vulgaris*. This was illuminated by what the

great Italian filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini said in response to a new wave of censorship introduced during the '70s: '...cinema can be, and in fact is, outside the strict control of the State ...so the State wants to dominate it: Producers, he spelled out, if they want to make money, aren't prepared to stop making films, so, 'make them the way the State wishes them to. The great mass of Italians do not possess the critical tools to resist this [censorship] action of the State: Pasolini perceptively pointed to the passivity and the impossibility of giving informed consent to the democratic process, induced by the ignorance that follows in the wake of censorship.

It is noticeable whenever a film or video is banned that we all take sides, for or against, in the censorship debate. But we seldom get around to discussing or understanding the very issues the censored material is exploring.

In the furore over the initially-banned four seconds of Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man* in which a woman, with a gun to her head, is fellating a man in the wild west, there was little or no discussion of the way in which this scene perfectly reveals the lies so often told about the white settler colonisation of the USA -all those valiant white heroes combating lawlessness, their women portrayed either safely in the homestead cooking apple pies, or else in the saloon showing a bit of naughty knicker and liable to break into song any moment.

Jarmusch chose to portray the reality of the violent exploitation and demeaning of women in early American society. What did the censors imagine Australians might think when they saw these four seconds? Were they afraid some audiences might pause to contemplate what were undoubtedly similar realities for the colonising white settlers in their own history?

Something similar happened when the acclaimed Spanish film *Tras el Cristal* was banned at the Sydney Queer Screen Festival last year. During a seminar discussing the censorship of this film, none of us spoke of the real issues the filmmaker raised -that of violence as expressed by child sexual abuse and the rise of neo- fascism in Europe today. How could we? We hadn't seen it.

Governments which embrace the censorship of violence don't diminish societal violence, they perpetuate and promote a passivity towards aggression and inhumanity by removing the very information we need to agitate, protest and demand an end to the conditions that produce violence in the first place.

When I questioned both the outgoing and incoming Arts Ministers during the last general election campaign, I was alarmed to discover neither were aware of the extent to which censorship has increased in the past couple of years. And by their lack of concern for the absence of any real debate among would-be consumers for the following:

- with no debate at all R-rated movies are banned from pay-TV;
- film festival audiences -who can be expected to know what they're going to see -are no longer allowed the freedom to see what they want;

- the new Classification Act now further limits what every adult should be allowed to read, hear and see, with its addition of the clause about the need to take account of community concerns about 'the portrayal of persons in a demeaning manner.

Welcome to wowserism; welcome to a country where myths and fallacies about the relationship between screen violence and actual violence are actively encouraged. Where adults and children alike are protected from the possibility of exploring in full what is involved in learning how to take moral judgements. Where there is now a diminished possibility of learning how to resist, as former Chief Censor Janet Strickland has said, a return to the 'hypocrisy and double standards' of Victorian times.

In the wake of the Port Arthur massacre, the knee-jerk censoring activities of the Federal Government has increased this promotion of a bias against understanding where the real roots of violence lie. There has also been an increase in the popular acceptance of the need for more censorship. For the banning of screen violence leads to a passive infantile condition in which we lack the ability to acquire or make sense of our inhumanity. Cultural and political isolation is ensured as we are left ignorant of how other societies and cultures do or don't make sense of inequality, degradation, exploitation, and power struggles.

At a Sydney Film Festival seminar on censorship last June, I outlined a number of myths about the portrayal of screen violence which the Government and much of the press media continue to promulgate. Myths which obfuscate the real issues, and which further contribute to lessening the likelihood of our gaining any insight into the meaning of our inhumanity. These myths promote a passivity which prevents us from making sense of society and the reality of violence.

These myths are largely based on the unproven premise that screen violence incites people to actual violence. There are those who believe -the current Minister for the Arts among them -that you don't have to prove the causal connection. It's up to you, say the moralisers and censors, to prove that it doesn't. This quite extraordinary mental contortion suggests a whole range of censoring possibilities:

- most violence takes place in the home and is perpetrated by family members or people who are known to the victim. Until the Australian Family Association actually proves there is no evidence between these factors and violence, hey! let's ban homes, families and friendships;

- Quentin Tarantino's last name suggests that we should censor not just his movies but, while we're at it, shall we ban Italian immigrants?

- have you noticed that it's mainly men both in society and in the movies who commit violent crimes? It may seem a somewhat overly Amazonian response, but may I suggest they're banned too?

- it's entirely possible that poverty, unemployment and poor education might be causally connected to violence although, I admit, not actually proven. Would anyone like to join me in a campaign to ban inequality?

Arnold Schwarzenegger the Terminator in Terminator 2

How much easier for Governments and those with a vested interest in maintaining the status quo to point the finger at screen violence than to root out those conditions which clearly are implicated in societal violence. As McKenzie Wark of Macquarie University has said so lucidly: 'Wishing to identify some kind of bad 'other' out there that is causing trouble is a way of not taking either personal or collective responsibility.'

Professor Duncan Campbell, chair of the 1990 National Committee on Violence said something similar: 'The causes of violence are extremely complex and we're not going to find any simple answers, even though many people would wish to ...The obsession with violent films, videos and games is a result of desperately searching around for something to pin the blame on' But such academics and experts, whose observations are underpinned by an academic rigour and educational discipline, have been disfranchised by the present government.

Senator Alston has ruled that academics and experts are to be removed from classification boards because they will become, not more professional and experienced as might be expected, but 'comfortable and desensitised' and are to be replaced by parents:

...if you have parents who are simply viewers for these purposes, then they are much more likely to give you a direct response from the heartland of Australia, rather than from an academic point of view.

What you don't want is the experts or the so-called professionals who tend to become very cynical and particularly when they look at research.

This is a cynical condemnation of education, academia, and professional expertise. But apart from the explicit discrimination against those who can't or don't want to have children, what else is going on here? Are these the very same parents who are considered too incompetent to switch off the telly or provide the educational environment within the home to help their children learn the difference between fantasy and reality, and so need the V-chip forced on them?

But no matter. The knowledge, education, expertise, experience and rigorous training of our professional experts and academics is as for nought. You don't need a university degree or any training to qualify for a place on the new classification boards -all you need is for your contraceptive to let you down.

Could this philosophy usefully be extended to other fields of academia and professionalism? Should surgeons be relieved of their scalpels and hand them over to barbers? My local

newsagent always looks a bit bored, could he perhaps find the time to run the nation's economy? Should I have taken over from the pilot on my flight over here? Now that parents are kept busy watching movies, why don't we make virginity a prerequisite for a political career?

Not that we should look to our expert Arts and Communications Minister for either logic or consistency as this report in a recent Sydney Morning Herald reveals:

Senator Alston said there was no proof that video violence caused community violence, and that therefore the Cabinet would be responding to community opinion rather than any kind of scientific facts. 'There is no conclusive evidence on any of this ...it is not quantifiable ...what you find is that [psychologists and academic researchers] will say things like repeated exposure to unnecessary levels of violence may contribute to juvenile delinquency: Well, as a lawyer, I say that proves nothing because it may or may not, so none of that is a safe basis on which to make classifications, so it becomes a matter of community expectations.

How come Alston's legal expertise, knowledge, training and experience as a lawyer qualify him to make a safe judgement, while that of others disqualifies them? Perhaps this philosophy is what really lies behind the recent swingeing cuts to universities. My God! They're clearly producing academics and experts; rein them in immediately!

The question we should ask is not does screen violence harm, but can the censorship of violence cause harm? More than this, do we have enough violence on our screens?

In conjunction with increased screen literacy, which I believe, like reading, writing and arithmetic, can and should be taught, and is a human right, the portrayal of violence on the screen can help us understand actual violence. And without an increased understanding, we can't hope to prevent it,

- In his review of the censored film *The Rock*, film critic David Stratton noted how many of the sometimes derided and criticised violent 'action movies of the '90s carry with them a positive small-liberal message' covert US interference in Third World countries was featured in both the Arnold Schwarzenegger film *True Lies* and the Steven Seagal epic *Under Siege 2*:

- I've stated elsewhere that *Terminator 2* needs its spectacular violence in order to present its strong argument for masculinity to encompass compassion, and *Falling Down* presents a swingeing attack on the heartlessness of Reaganomic America,

- George Miller has spoken of how his *Mad Max* trilogy is 'about the redemption of a lost soul and how ultimately Max relinquishes his self-interest and becomes the agent of renewal'

These are far from being unimportant issues. They are ones all members of society should be encouraged to explore, and the violent movie or video provides us with the safe place to do so.

Miller optimistically predicts the ultimate death of censorship. I doubt it. For governments will always realise the value of censorship: it results in societal passivity; it is a means of controlling how and what people think and do; it is in the interests of governments to fall for the illusion that social ills can be fixed by restricting the portrayal of them. Tony Bond, Head Curator at the

Art Gallery of New South Wales, spoke of the prevalence of fantasy media violence as being 'part of the wider problem [which] is the denial of mortality in western culture. If death were not such a taboo, then artists of all kinds would not be so drawn to the exploration of it.'

Isn't a denial of mortality also very much a part of a culture that produces violent individuals, governments, presidents and communities who like to think they can get away with violating women, bugging their children, sending missiles scudding over the Middle East, or ignoring the gap between rich and poor whenever it seems expedient! Unless our artists, of high or low culture, explore this taboo, how are we ever going to learn how to accept personal or collective responsibility for the deep-rooted causes of societal violence! How, as Susan Sontag asked, if we censor, ban, or otherwise snip away at those bits of art and popular culture that we're afraid of, will the next generation learn the lessons of good and evil!

There are signs that the nature of violence as portrayed in the mega-buck Hollywood blockbuster is changing; it's becoming funnier, more self-reflexive, and more camp. Not because filmmakers and audiences have become desensitised but because, as the London Financial Times film critic, Nigel Andrews, writes:

Camp invites us to see and savour the contradictions between a film's aspirations and reality ...Camp allows a filmgoer to stand outside a film and see it wryly from multiple angles the whoopings and hollerings of those who side with Action Arnie or Bullet-Spraying Sly bespeak an awareness that this is excess as style.

More and more this perceptual sophistication offers itself as modern cinema's own deconstruction programme, one that makes life even more problematic for today's would-be censors, who find themselves aiming at a perpetual moving target.

What gives real cause for concern is not that our censors might find life problematic, but the way in which the censoring of violence from our screens can do so much more harm than good.

A recent article in *The Australian* by journalist John Miner offered an insight into why Hollywood violence can seem gratuitous to non-American audiences. He proposed the USA as a nation whose history includes a violent revolution and struggle for independence, and a bloody civil war -the first of the modern wars where thousands were killed in a single day; and a society which needed a Lincoln to put such violence in terms of a struggle for the survival of democracy:

It is no wonder that American portrayals of violence are sometimes interpreted in our society as gratuitous when an American audience would see them as integral to a philosophical, even a theological position. Hollywood is not going to stop hundreds of years of cultural acceptance overnight. It's not Hollywood culture that is at the heart of the problem. Violence is a part of American history and has performed a function in the most serious American literature for 200 years that it has never done in this country.

But Miner writes as if violence is not a part of Australian history. It clearly is from the treatment of the early convicts, the attempted decimation of the Aboriginal people, to the current Aboriginal deaths in custody statistics. It is clearly a large part of Australian history.

But do we find it in much of our culture? There's Mad Max and Romper Stomper, Bad Boy Bubby, and Body Melt also spring to mind. There are others, of course, but a quick glance down the list of this year's AFI nominations reveals very little in mainstream public-funded cinema. Where are the movies which explore violence in the way that Once Were Warriors, Trainspotting, or David Cronenberg's Crash (which Australians now may never get to see) do? In New Zealand Once Were Warriors, given a general classification certificate prompted a widespread public discussion of racism and family violence. Here in Australia, where it was granted a restrictive upper-age classification, there was no such debate.

Where are the Australian films that portray societal violence, both historical and present-day, that we should be exploring, making sense of and, with this knowledge, trying to diminish, even eliminate? Are our filmmaking artists burying their heads in the sand and refusing to accept what many of us suspect: that inhumanity is innate? They and the film-funding bodies are not helping us realise the need to take personal and collective responsibility, and to rise above it in order to eradicate the very real social ills that promote violence. The general reluctance on the part of the Australian filmmaking community to confront what might be painful indicates a high degree of censorship even before the Office of Film and Literature Classifications gets a look in.

All censorship makes for a passive, infantilised condition in which what happens in the real world is not addressed. Unreality, no involvement, no responsibility: time out from the democratic process.

The food might be a whole lot better, but it's beginning to feel as if I'm still on that British Airways jumbo jet.