

THE AUSTRALIAN BROADCASTING COMMISSION

NOTES ON THE NEWS

John R. Raser

B/cast 24.1.74  
2FC 1.23 p.m.

There has been a lot of talk in Australia recently about changing the pornography laws. It seems there is always a lot of talk in Australia about changing the pornography laws! But very little ever actually happens. The letter ratings on movies are slightly re-described. A book which had been formerly banned is allowed to enter the country. Magazines with "naughty" pictures are allowed to be sold above the counter rather than below. And what not. But underlying all this fiddling with the fringes of the law, lies an almost unquestioned and rock hard morality which guarantees that blatant display of sexual organs shall be outside the law - while blatant displays of violence and brutality shall not. And so the values of the society are made clear.

But serious self-deception, I will not say hypocrisy, is revealed by the way we talk about pornography, the language we use and the arguments we formulate. This is most clearly illustrated in the censorship of films, and indeed, it is with so-called "blue" films that the gulf between the way we talk and the way we surely must feel in our hearts gapes most widely. We look at lithe actors simulating copulation, or in some cases acting out copulation, under a flood of lights, with dangling microphones, with cameras zooming in and out to catch every pore and hair and drop of perspiration, with a director shouting orders while the writhing actors worry about hot lights and running make-up. And we claim that to sit with several hundred other people in a darkened theatre and watch the product of all this being displayed on a sixty foot screen is "Watching sex", or that these films show "people engaged in sexual activity". They don't, of course, any more than a picture of a slick gangster clutching his breast and falling gracefully to the ground after the invisible impact of an imaginary bullet, carries with it the stench and agony and mess of real death.

How does all this reveal something about our false images? Because real sexuality is a matter of two people finding a magical and portentous means of physical and mental communication which is tender, eager, frightening, creating, fulfilling, and essentially the ultimate mystery of life. It is not a matter of performances and techniques, undulating movements, revealed genitals or novel positions. And when suchlike is what films show, and call it sex; when this is what audiences see, and think of it as what sex is about - we are all sadly degrading the most powerful and lovely of human experiences. We are betraying our deepest sensibilities. We are crucifying ourselves. Freud called it a disease in the culture - the ascendancy of thanatos over eros - or in more common terms, the dominance of that which is sterile and dead over that which is creating and alive. So its not sexuality that is being screened for Australian audiences; it is merely a display of genitals and programmed movements. The real essence of sexuality - that spontaneous and ultimately vulnerable joining of the fragments - just isn't available for that kind of social and commercial exploitation. Its just not there when you try to "perform" it, so to talk of "banning sexuality" in films is sheer nonsense. What we are really talking of banning is nudity and simulated sex - and there perhaps a case can be made. However, history shows that if democratic society is to flourish, as few things as humanly possible should be made illegal. Its much wiser, it usually develops, to leave it to the discretion of individuals as to what they will drink, read, smoke, look at, or do in private. Laws for the social control of private behaviour have a nasty habit of spawning bureaucratic enforcing systems which erode democratic processes. If there is any case to be made for outlawing some forms of sexual or pseudo-sexual commercial material it is just because they are phony goods and the public is being misled. It is not because they are sexual that they are dangerous, it is precisely because they are not. They purpot to show what sexuality is, and in doing so they create a brutal travesty on what should be one of the most precious treasures of human culture. In the Biblical sense, they are blasphemy.

There is another sense too, in which such material is pernicious. The films nearly always portray beautiful people in the midst of luxury engaging in endless sexual athletics and going from orgasm to orgasm, from conquest to conquest, from novel experience to novel experience. Women are shameless and insatiable, men are cocksure and inexhaustible. What a yawning gulch between this and the reality most people live! Now a cacaphony of advertising enters, to hint in a million blatant and seductive ways that such a sexual utopia can be yours if you will just buy this and wear that and drive this and smoke that and on and on and on. Love, it is hinted, is lurking behind shop counters and in a pot at the end of hire-purchase. Thus, the gap between the ideal created on the screen and the reality of life is a major motive force for commerce. PLAYBOY only makes explicit what is implicit in most advertising. Perceived sexual deprivation acts in the absence of a real economic whip as a psychic whip - driving the masses of men and women to work and buy and worry and strive in a futile attempt to achieve a false ideal. It is an exceptionally subtle and cruel form of human exploitation in the interests of consumer capitalism.

So I suggest that if we must have pornography laws, and if we are capable of going beyond the silly mentality which can react mindlessly only in terms of "dirt" and "filth", that we should judge films not on the basis of how many rude words are in them or on how explicit some act of copulation may be, but rather in terms of whether they portray sexuality as something involving violence, performance, exploitation, materialism and impersonality. If they do, they should be disdained (though as I said, I don't think outlawed) on the basis that such a vision of sexuality warps and sickens us all. If, by some miracle, film producers begin to at least try to convey the joyous and human essence of eros through their art, then such films - and books and magazines - should be welcomed and valued, regardless of how many square inches of skin the censors can count.