Overt censorship makes everyone an artist

Editor's note: (by Dave Mazerolle, former Features Editor)

Though dated, this article, given as a speech to a conference of the Canadian University Press in December, 1974, addresses a topic that just will not die. Censorship has been a part of nearly every civilisation, race and epoch of mankind. Governments claim the right to censor what people see, read, watch, hear and sometimes even think. Even in societies which have certain free speech clauses in their consitiutions, there exist censor boards who still attempt to assert their bias on others. Morality is their god, "community standards" are their rallying cry, and laws are their weapons.

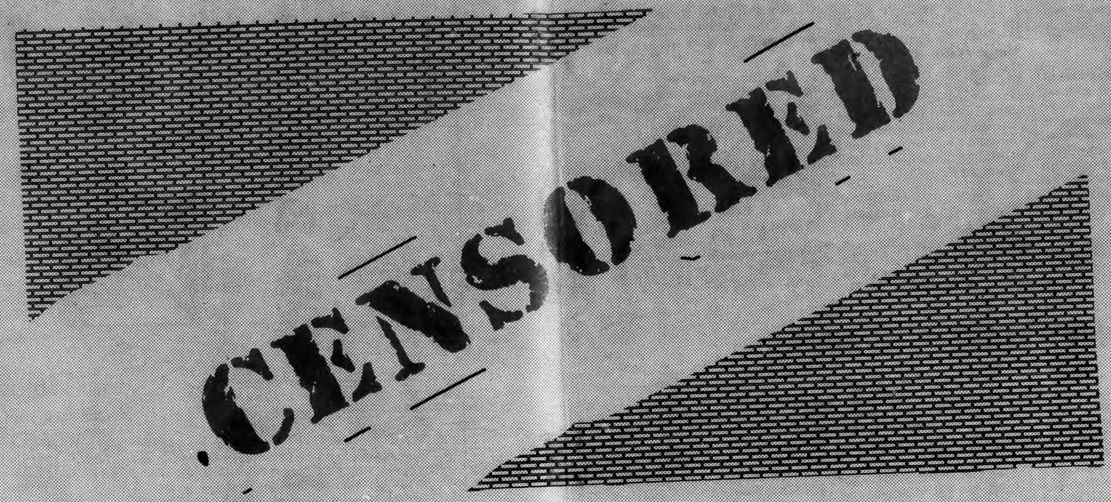
There is a new censorship battle which can hit young people in one of their favourite pastimes: listening to rock music. The United States Congress is currently hearing testimony from a group formed by Washington senators' wives, the Parents' Music Resource Center (PMRC), and the rock stars the wives wish to police. Although this congressional road show is a joy to watch for the humour implicit in having Frank Zappa and Twisted Sister's Dee Snider, among others, address the staid members of such an august body, there is an undeniable offensiveness to the PMRC and the situation of power that makes them heard. Is it perhaps only because the PMRC's co-founder is Tipper Gore, wife of Democratic senator Albert Gore Jr. of Tennessee, that the group can get the attention of Congress? Why is it that these connections can get Congress to concern itself with Cyndi Lauper's ode to onanism, "She Bop"? The PMRC wishes to have records rated with letters designating mentions of sex, drug use, or devil worship on the album. All that rock performers will feel is a notoriety that will invariably increase their cachet with record buyers, and hence, their success. In the politically repressive fifties, Little Richard's sexually titillating "race music" and semi-drag queen persona made him wildly successfull. For a more modern example, look at Prince's success in the conservative Reagan era.

If you've ever flocked to see 'Last Tango in Paris" because the Ontario Censor Board banned it, if you've ever read "Lady Chatterly's Lover" "just to see what the fuss is about", then you should not allow powerful political minorities to legislate what they think offends you.

Frank Zappa has devised a sticker for his own albums, a "warning/guarantee", that cautions, "In some socially retarded areas, religious fanatics and ultra-conservative political organizations violate your First Amendment rights by attempting to censor rock and roll albums." One must feel some sort of admiration for a man who can sing about bodily functions and sodomy in such a charming and amusing fashion. History shows us whatever a society thinks it should prohibit always thrives in the underground.

Bob Bossin was the Reviews Editor at the Varsity, the student newspaper at the University of Toronto. This article originally appeared in the March 21, 1973 edition of the Varsity.

As a nod to the "community standards" of the Brunswickan's audience, the article will retain words that we are smart enough, and strong enough, to handle.



Phoniness always bothers me more than the vice it covers, so plain old garden variety, we-won't-let-you-see-that censorship doesn't trouble me much. I'll be alright if they bar "Last Tango in Paris". I can imgine scenes that would burn holes in the film.

Often enough I get a kick out of censorship. Mona Lisa does nothing for me, but put a black rectangle across her eyes and she becomes art. I really dig not being allowed to see things that are OK in New Brunswick; I love it when the Varisty appeared during the FLQ affair with "CENSORED" replacing lines of type: I love the beeps and little soundless passages in talk shows, the triple asterisks in Esquire. Was it shit? cock? fuck? cunt? pee? poo? tit? Are you allowed to say tit? Once I was given $100 to play a left-wing extremist on a Norm Perry show and I wanted to test the aesthetic possibilities of beeps. For example, I would answer a perfectly civil question with a chain of curses, all the time looking composed as a cucumber. If Perry tried to ask why I'd done it, I'd swear while he did, making him beep back at me. I thought about using beeps for punctuation (I'm fine, thanks, Norm, beep). Unfortunately I found out that the show was live and uncensored, so I didn't get to do it.

Overt censorship makes everybody an artist. When Abbie Hoffman appeared on the Merv Griffin show as a black band on the screen and a disembodied voice, we were told it was because he wore a shirt made from a flag, but can you ever be really sure? In my heart I run with that fringe percent who don't believe for a second that anybody has been anywhere near the moon.

Phony censorship, however, galls me, and for every ounce of the old high school debating topic, there is a ton of sneaky programmed selections advertising themselves as free choice. Most of it isn't at all connected with censorship boards, but a little of it is, in a grey, semi-overt way.

There are two co-ordinates for a censor: the boinggg test is one (If a work makes him go boinggg, it's bad and oughtn't to be shown). The other co-ordinate is pressure, and the censor reacts to pressure on his office the same way he reacts to pressure under his robes. The Ontario Film Censorship Board, for instance, takes community standards -i.e. standards from the community - very seriously. So, if you want to see Last Tango, write the board. I'm told it really will make a difference (particularly because they will be tottering on that one anyway. Deep Throat, however, will be an uphill fight.)

It is not only the public who apply pressure, though. Titticut Follies was a cinema-verite documentary filmed in an American mental hospital, as critical as film can be. (How often do you masturbate", asks a psychiatrist. "About three times a day", a patient replies. "Too much!" says the doctor.) The film was turned down for a showing here at the same time as Morton Shulman was muck-raking the Ontario Mental Hospital system. The provincial government did not want the added publicity and asked its board to block the movie. It was banned for nudity and profanity, if I recall correctly.

The censor board also sways to movie industry pressure, which while it serves some films, leaves others even more vulnerable. Movie distributors are not artists, they are businessmen, and they try to put a buck where it will make two. The Godfather was a sure-fire hit; Sweet Sweetback's Badass Song on the other hand was keyed to a black audience that didn't exist in Ontario, so if it was banned it would not be a big revenue loss. It was banned. A Clockwork Orange, fronted by Kubrick's name, fame and distributor support, kicked out all the jams. Meanwhile, Dusan Mackarayev's WR:Mysteries of the Organism has never been shown, even though Mackarayev was invited to be on the jury for the Canadian Film Awards. In the States, Don Shebib's Goin' Down the Road lost its chance at real profit when it was X-rated, leaving Pauline Kael to accuse that if Shebib's film had been an American studio production, it would have been sure to get General Audience approval. This could not have been far from Kael's mind when she launched Bertolucci's Last Tango in Paris on its notorious course with her unprecedented praise, well before the New York conference was scheduled. The Time and Newsweek covers, in fact most of the hoopla, have been politically designed to make it difficult for the censor to censor.

The official censor, then, is pretty small potatoes. He walks behind the elephant, and the elephant goes where the guy who owns the circus decides.

It is a favorite concept among the far left that bosses - including movie bosses -conspire to blinker the people's vision. Among the liberal left the concept is that an entrepreneur would sell an Indian the gun with which to shoot him if it would turn a profit. The latter is the easier position to take, although Abbie Hoffman stuck a spanner in it when he wrote *Steal This Book*, a property so sour that even the greediest publisher would not put it on his presses. (Hoffman published it himself, but the Canadian government declared it an illegal import, so it is unavailable here. Nor is Hoffman allowed in the country.) Whichever model you choose, it costs a pile of money to produce a movie, magazine, TV show, book or record, and those who pay the piper are understandably careful as to what tune they pick. Take Jack L. Warner, the last of the Warner Brothers: "Bonnie and Clyde had good wex in it. It had what we call the Old Elements. My film, Dirty Little Billy has them too. Good sex, nice little barmaid, a red-light house, bandits, a shoot-out, the Old Elements." What Jack L. Warner pays for, you see.

And, conversely, what you go to see is what the Warners will pay for.

Alan Resnais and Richard Lester are two highly praised directors whose last couple of films flopped at the box office. Neither has been able to raise a picture for the last few years. Orson Welles' promise fad·d on the same grounds. Sam Peckinpah, on the other hand, hedges his bets with a steady stream of violent pictures. He is too unpopular in Hollywood to risk financial failure two films in a row, so the best he can hope to do is sneak in a Junior Bonner between Straw Dogs and The Getaway. What has always appeared to be his bloody predilection may be survival instinct.

Movie financiers know that the vast majority of the money spent on movie tickets last year was spent on fourteen pictures, and they know which fourteen pictures they were.

Even where the theatre people are in it for love of movies, there are still plenty of barriers between what they would like to show and what you get to see. With most art films, there are only one or two prints in the country, and they must be shipped to an independent operator from wherever they were last shown, perhaps right across the country. If the film hasn't been shown before in the country, a fee must be paid to each provincial censorship board for clearance. (Approximately 170 for an average length film in Ontario.) In many cases the distributor figures, rightly, that it isn't worth it for the money involved. In some cases a North American distributor wants far more money than a small Canadian art house can take in, which is why Jodorowski's El Topo, distributed by Alan Klein, has never been seen here. And, since the repertory theatres are dependent on later showings of films receiving their first run downtown, they suffer whenever a first run art house discontinues its booking policy - and first run art houses are dropping like flies.

The alternative to business money for film-makers and artists is government money. But government censorship is just as bad, only more openly political. The National Film Board and the CBC are notorious for the restrictions they place on projects. The This Hour Has Seven Days case was only exceptional for the arrogance the network showed in the face of the public's support of the program. The Canadian Film Development Corporation has been more discreet, but it becomes clearer and clearer that certain films don't get financed. There was a spate of movies promised out of the FLQ kidnappings and repression, but none raised the money. Now even La Guerre, Yes Sir has had its financing dropped by the CFDC, for reasons that a number of film people suspect are pretty political.

Business and government are the Scylla and Charybdis film-makers have to sail by., To the few that make it through, the censor is a minor squall very near port.