

The banning and unbanning in Australia of the new French film *Romance*

Richard Phillips
11 February 2000

Australia's five-member Classification Review Board has overturned an Office of Film and Literature Classification (OFLC) ban on *Romance*, the latest film by well-known French writer and director Catherine Breillat. The film, which has been described as a serious portrait of a young woman who embarks on a harrowing sexual and psychological odyssey because her self-absorbed boyfriend refuses to make love to her, will be released uncut with an R certificate. An R-certificate bars admission of under 18-year-olds.

The Review Board decided to release the film after an appeal by Potential Films, *Romance*'s Australian distributor. Breillat wrote to the OFLC protesting the decision to ban the film declaring: "Nudity, love and sex are part of our daily life and if my film is sexually explicit, it has nothing to do with a porn film. It is rather the opposite approach [and] as a critic of the prestigious UK magazine, *Time Out* [said, it is] an 'anti-porn movie'."

There was widespread public criticism of the film's banning. Concerns were voiced over the Howard government's tightening censorship regime. Many expected that the Review Board would maintain the ban. But after a daylong meeting on January 28, the Review Board issued a short press release stating that *Romance* did not offend standards "generally accepted by reasonable adults" and that "adults should be able to read, hear and see what they want".

These comments were interpreted by some Australian film industry figures, including *Romance*'s distributor, as establishing a new precedent that brought "Australia into line with the rest of the world". Mark Spratt, from Potential Films, said distributors could now be more confident about importing sexually-explicit films. Alex Meskovic, operator of the Chauvel Cinema, which will be screening the film in Sydney, told the media:

"Finally we get some sense into the stupid censorship system we've got in this country."

The lifting of the ban should obviously be welcomed. It would, however, be a serious political misjudgement to view the Review Board's ruling as a reversal of Australia's strict censorship laws. Rather, the original OFLC decision is a more accurate reflection of the attitudes prevailing in senior government circles.

Over the last four years the Howard government, has introduced a series of measures aimed at establishing a stricter censorship code. It has been pushed along by the Lyons Forum—a lobby group of about 20 federal MPs and 13 government senators with links to Christian fundamentalist formations.

Chris Miles, a former parliamentary secretary to Prime Minister Howard, and John Bradford, a federal MP now representing the rightwing Christian Democratic Party, established the Lyons Forum in 1992. It has demanded that all sexually explicit films and videos be banned. The group's membership lists are secret but it is believed that they include up to 15 of Howard's front bench, among them Deputy Prime Minister John Anderson, Treasurer Peter Costello, Education Minister David Kemp and Social Security Minister Senator Jocelyn Newman.

The campaign to strengthen censorship laws began in earnest in May 1996 when the Howard government seized on the Port Arthur massacre, a shooting spree in Tasmania in which 35 people died, to claim that the tragedy was the product of easy access to violent videos and films, as well as guns. Howard established a special ministerial committee, which included Miles, to investigate the violence in the electronic media. The committee recommended that the government tighten censorship guidelines, ban X-rated movies and change personnel at the OFLC and Classification Review

Board, which it claimed had too many experts and not enough parents.

The government latched onto the widespread concern over the killings to set a precedent for overriding democratic rights and freedoms. Another parliamentary committee, known as the Senate Committee for Community Standards, urged new censorship guidelines declaring that "the community cost of events such as the Port Arthur and Hoddle Street massacres is so high that the interest of the community should take precedence over individual liberty."

In 1997 the government passed the Broadcasting Services Amendment Act (No 2), barring all sexually explicit, non-violent adult programming from cable television. The following year it banned three films: Pasolini's classic anti-fascist movie, *Salo*, a 1978 horror film, *I Spit on Your Grave*, and *Sick: The life and death of Bob Flanagan—Supermasochist*, a documentary movie about US performing artist Bob Flanagan, a victim of cystic fibrosis.

In April 1999 the Federation of Australian Commercial Television Stations, after heavy government lobbying, agreed to introduce a new code for free-to-air television programming. Sex or nudity without "serious cause or justification" were banned and the "Violence Restriction Time" preventing the broadcast of graphic footage, including on news programs, was extended until 9.30pm.

Next the Broadcasting Services Amendment (Online Services) Act was passed to filter and censor the Internet, under the guise of preventing children accessing pornography. The laws, similar to those used in Singapore and China, established a monitoring department within the Australian Broadcasting Authority with the power to fine or close down Internet Service Providers hosting material considered to be offensive. ISPs have one day to remove offending content or face fines of \$27,000 per day.

The government targetted the OFLC last year after it voted to release Adrian Lyne's *Lolita*. Long time anti-communist and anti-abortionist, Senator Brian Harradine, and Liberal MP Trish Draper, a spokesperson for the Lyons Forum, claimed that the film promoted paedophilia and pressed the government to change the OFLC's personnel.

Shortly afterwards, the Cabinet rejected a list of seven new classifiers proposed by the OFLC and instructed

the organisation to appoint "more ordinary" Australians. Federal cabinet rarely considers the selection of OFLC personnel and so its decision to reject an entire list was unprecedented. The majority of those now serving as OFLC classifiers or members of the Classification Review Board, including Simon Webb, the acting head of the OFLC, have no film, literary or artistic experience.

The ban on *Romance* was the first fruit of this change. According to press reports, an initial panel of classifiers was prepared to release the film. Webb responded to this by convening a larger group of 17 members, including well-known conservatives, who voted 9-8 to ban the film. Webb told the media that *Romance* went beyond "generally accepted community expectations and standards".

Anyone who believes that the lifting of the ban signals a new liberalisation should consider why this movie, widely regarded as a serious film and shown at numerous international film festivals, including last year's Melbourne Film Festival, and in countries such as Ireland and Turkey, was outlawed in the first place.

They should also recall remarks made to the press by National Party Senator Julian McGuaran, an active member of the Lyons Forum, in February 1998 when Pasolini's *Salo* was banned. McGuaran, whose brother Chris is the junior arts minister in the Howard government, told the *Sydney Morning Herald* at that time: "This movie was a line in the sand. I don't give two hoots about artistic freedom... I'm actually over the moon that the artists have been pulled back into line."

The Howard government, McGuaran and other members of the Lyons Forum no doubt regard the Classification Review Board's decision on *Romance* as a setback. Their response will be to intensify their efforts to establish greater censorship and controls on artistic and intellectual freedom.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact