

Australian government bans Sydney Film Festival movie

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16 June 2003

In a major attack on artistic freedom and democratic rights, Australia's censor board has banned screenings of the US film *Ken Park* at the June 6-20 Sydney Film Festival. The decision was made by the government's Office of Film and Literature Classification (OFLC) and is the first time a movie scheduled for a local festival has been banned in Australia for almost a quarter of a century.

Directed by Larry Clark and Ed Lachman, *Ken Park* is set in California. It attempts to deal with the personal and social difficulties facing four American teenagers. The sexually explicit film premiered at the Venice Film Festival last year and has screened at a number of international festivals. It has been released commercially in several European countries, including Austria, Spain, Belgium and the Netherlands, and will be shown at a film festival in New Zealand next week.

New Zealand's Classification Office has described the movie as "an insightful presentation of the societal and family pressures on teenagers," explicitly stating that it "did not promote or support" the exploitation of young people for sexual purposes. "On the contrary," NZ classification authorities continued, "the film clearly exposes such behaviour as being potentially harmful to those involved."

Australia's OFLC, however, declared late last month that *Ken Park* "offended the standards of morality, decency and propriety generally accepted by reasonable adults." On June 6, a three-member OFLC review board rejected an appeal by film distributors and festival organizers, and upheld the previous decision. It claimed that the movie involved "child sexual abuse."

Festival president Cathy Robinson told the media that the review panel had deliberately introduced the issue of "child sexual abuse" to confuse debate over the film. There were no grounds for banning *Ken Park*, she said, because the actors were not children, festival audiences were required to be over 18 years, and the issues raised by the film were serious and worthy of examination by adults.

The OFLC ruling, which affects film festivals and distribution companies throughout the country, makes it illegal to screen, hire or advertise *Ken Park* anywhere in Australia, with fines of A\$11,000 and one year's jail for individuals or A\$250,000 for companies that defy the ban.

Past and present festival organisers have denounced the decision and called on film patrons to lobby federal parliamentarians. Appeals have also been made to the state Labor government in New South Wales to bypass the decision. Under current law, the state attorney general can give "Special Exemption" to allow a festival screening, but so far the NSW government has made no response or comment on the ban.

The OFLC decision is the outcome of an extended campaign by the Howard government, various Christian fundamentalist groups and the

Lyons Forum. Established in 1992 by Chris Miles, Prime Minister John Howard's former parliamentary secretary, and John Bradford, a member of the Christian Democratic Party, the forum wants all sexually explicit films and videos banned.

The right-wing lobby group refuses to reveal its membership. But it is believed to have 20 federal MPs and 13 senators as supporters, including Deputy Prime Minister John Anderson and Treasurer Peter Costello, as well as members of the Labor Party. South Australian Liberal MP Trish Draper, National Party MP De-Anne Kelly, anti-abortionist Tasmanian senator Brian Harradine and Reverend Fred Nile, a NSW state Upper House MP and leader of the Christian Democratic Party, have all been identified with the formation. Nile regularly denounces homosexuals as "evil" and wants anyone satirising the church to be charged with blasphemy.

The campaign for harsher Australian censorship laws, long demanded by these elements, intensified soon after the election of the Howard government in March 1996. Seizing upon the Port Arthur massacre in Tasmania in April 1996, in which a mentally ill man killed 35 people, Howard established a special ministerial committee to investigate "violence in the media." The committee claimed the tragedy was the result of easy access to violent videos and films. It called for tougher censorship laws, the banning of X-rated movies and a change of personnel at the OFLC and Classification Review Board, which it claimed contained too many "experts."

Next, the Howard government established the Senate Committee for Community Standards, which urged new censorship guidelines, declaring that the impact of the Port Arthur massacre and the danger of repeat occurrences were so serious that "the interest of the community should take precedence over individual liberty."

A regressive strengthening of Australia's broadcasting laws and censorship bodies immediately followed.

In 1997, the government passed the Broadcasting Services Amendment Act, which barred all sexually explicit, non-violent adult programs from cable television. In 1998, the OFLC banned three films: Pasolini's anti-fascist film *Salò*; a 1978 horror film, *I Spit on Your Grave*; and the documentary *Sick: The life and death of Bob Flanagan—Supermasochist*, about the US performance artist, a victim of cystic fibrosis.

The banning of *Salò* prompted National Party senator and Lyons Forum member Julian McGuaran to declare: "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."

One year later, more restrictive codes on free-to-air television programming were introduced, with sex or nudity banned, unless

“serious cause and justification” existed, and the “Violence Restriction Time” was extended until 9:30 p.m., preventing the broadcast of graphic footage, including on news programs.

Next, the government passed the Broadcasting Services Amendment (Online Services) Act to control Internet access, under the guise of preventing children from 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 (ISPs) hosting material considered offensive. ISPs have one day to remove offending content or face fines of A\$27,000 per day.

The same year, the Australian National Gallery axed the *Sensation* exhibition, despite announcing a few months earlier that it would be the centerpiece of the gallery’s 2000 program. The decision followed the direct intervention of Communication and Arts Minister Richard Alston, who disapproved of the show. In 2001, the Review Board reclassified *Pictures*, a book by well-known US photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, after South Australian police seized the publication from an Adelaide bookshop. The book was reclassified Category 1-Restricted.

When the OFLC and its Review Board rejected attempts by extreme right-wing lobby groups to ban Adrian Lyne’s film *Lolita* in 1999 and Catherine Breillat’s *Romance* in 2000, the Howard government began stacking the censorship body. Retiring members were replaced with personnel reflecting the government’s reactionary political outlook and agenda.

While the federal cabinet had rarely considered the selection of OFLC personnel, in 1999 it made an unprecedented intervention. Vetoing six prospective classifiers, it claimed they were not “ordinary” Australians.

In 2000, former Melbourne mayor Des Clark—a Liberal Party hack and close friend of Richard Alston—was appointed OFLC and Review Board director.

Today, senior business personnel with no serious qualifications in the fields of art, film or literature dominate the six-member Review Board. They include Jonathan O’Dea, a private health insurance company director; Dawn Grassick, an industry representative on the Therapeutic Goods Advertising Code Council; and Jan Taylor, president of the Queensland branch of the Women Chiefs of Enterprises International. Review Board convenor Maureen Shelley is the Australian Council of Businesswomen’s chief executive officer and company director.

Last year, the OFLC Review Board banned *Baise-moi* by French film director Virginie Despentes. The decision was taken after federal Attorney General Daryl Williams directed the OFLC to review its previous classification of the film. Williams intervened after Fred Nile contacted him and demanded the government prevent the film from being screened.

The *Ken Park* ban reverses years of struggle during the 1950s and 1960s by film festival organisers, artists, writers and intellectuals against Australia’s notoriously backward and reactionary censorship regime. In fact, film festivals in Australia, like many of their counterparts internationally, were initially established in order to challenge government restrictions on artistic and intellectual freedom and provide access to serious and ground-breaking international cinema.

The last film banned at an Australian festival was *I Love, You Love* by Swedish director Stig Bjorkman in 1969. Australian authorities stopped the movie from being screened because it contained a scene in

which a pregnant woman had sex. Another festival film shown that year had scenes cut by local censors.

Widespread opposition to these outrageous bans forced the Liberal-National government to back away and allow special consideration to be given to film festivals. But these measures were never formally legislated. Now, more than 20 years on, the Howard government has decided to directly attack the democratic rights of film festival patrons.

Irrespective of the immediate cultural value of *Ken Park*, the Howard government’s ban is a clear violation of the right of adults to watch and read whatever they choose. Moreover, the measure attempts to intimidate local filmmakers and artists from producing work that might directly challenge the government.

It is no accident that the ban on the screening of *Ken Park* and last year’s censorship of *Baise-moi* have occurred during the greatest attack on civil liberties in postwar history.

Under the banner of the Bush administration’s so-called war against terrorism, the Howard government has dramatically boosted military spending and strengthened police powers. Legislation being introduced in federal parliament will allow Australian Security and Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) agents to detain and interrogate people without charge for up to a week, including children as young as 16. In the guise of “fighting terrorism,” suspects can be continuously interrogated for eight hours at a time.

Just two weeks before the *Ken Park* ban, the Howard government, in the aftermath of its participation in the illegal US-led war against Iraq, launched a highly publicised campaign against the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) claiming the state-funded national network was “anti-American.” Communications and Arts Minister Alston directly targetted the network’s news director Max Uechtritz and the *AM* radio news program, threatening to cut ABC funds and establish a “content-monitoring authority,” or external censor body, over the network.

These actions, in line with other serious attacks being carried out by the government on basic democratic rights, including the mandatory detention of refugees and asylum seekers, highlight the government’s growing fear of any artistic or creative endeavour that may encourage critical opposition to its policies.

That is why the fight against the *Ken Park* ban can only go forward to the extent that it is linked to the development of a broad-based movement of the working class against the government’s entire economic, social and political agenda.



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