

Australia: Police block protest screening of banned film

Our reporter
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Hundreds of people packed into the inner-Sydney Balmain Town Hall last Thursday night to watch *Ken Park* and to protest its banning by Australia's Office of Film and Literature Classification (OFLC). In scenes not witnessed since the 1960s, when the vice squad frequently shut down films and theatre productions deemed illegal, uniformed police marched onto the stage and prevented the film from being screened.

To justify their decision to intervene, the police later said they were acting on a letter of complaint from Reverend Fred Nile, a rightwing Christian fundamentalist MP. However, the New South Wales state Labor government of Premier Bob Carr undoubtedly gave the go-ahead for the police actions. It is the first time a film has been banned from the Sydney Film Festival in 30 years.

A feature film by American directors Larry Clark and Ed Lachman, *Ken Park* was originally scheduled for screening at the film festival on June 17. However, the OFLC refused to classify it or grant the movie a festival exemption, ruling it was below standards expected by a "reasonable adult". The film deals with the themes of teenage alienation, loneliness and abuse and is currently on general release throughout Europe and America.

The mood last Thursday night was defiant and the audience predominantly young. A protest screening held the previous night in Melbourne buoyed the sentiments of many of those present.

In Sydney, protest organisers from "Free Cinema"—a coalition of concerned critics and filmmakers—remained tight-lipped, refusing to confirm whether the film would be shown. But hundreds turned up regardless. Early evening news broadcasts showed police on standby.

Inside, four uniformed police waited by the stage for the meeting to begin. Two of the officers moved toward a projector in the aisle and were booed by the crowd.

At 8.15 p.m., SBS television's *Movie Show* presenter Margaret Pomeranz made her way through the assembled media onto the stage. She was greeted with prolonged applause and an overwhelming show of hands to "share

responsibility" for *Ken Park*'s screening. But as the film's opening sequence played, three uniformed police made their way across the stage toward the projector, instructing Pomeranz to stop the DVD. The film was eventually stopped, with police taking down the particulars of Pomeranz and other organisers before a stunned and angry audience.

Superintendent Arthur Katsogiannis later said Pomeranz and others from the Free Cinema group could receive a warning. If they were charged and convicted for screening *Ken Park* they could receive a jail sentence of up to a year.

"We have seen ultimately how film censorship works in this country," *Media Watch* TV presenter David Marr told the audience, "This is ultimately how it is done—with a team of police, in a hall full of people. This is an extraordinary occasion."

Actor Sasha Horler spoke next from the stage. There were many similarities, she warned, between *Ken Park* and *Praise*, the 1999 Australian film directed by John Curran, in which she starred. "We weren't banned though. We were lucky."

Horler spoke passionately about the role of artists: "They are there to show us a part of the world that exists—do we just close our eyes?" Actors, like writers, were storytellers who tried to show "something honest that reflects life, its raw beauty, ugliness, some of its pain, embarrassment, joy and ecstasy."

"The film is controversial? Good. The film will shock you? Good. It will cause debate and it will maybe even educate... because that's what good art does." She received thunderous applause, concluding, "As we all know, censorship is the death of art".

Film critic David Stratton challenged the censorship of *Ken Park*, saying: "We are being lied to by the Office of Film and Literature Classification. *Ken Park* does not contain scenes of child sexual abuse." Describing a scene cited by the OFLC, he explained: "It's a scene where an actor, playing a teenage boy, is sexually attacked by his drunken father and fobs him off. It is a scene which is

clearly attacking child abuse.”

A former director of the Sydney Film Festival during the 1970s, Stratton took issue with federal Attorney-General Darryl Williams’ claim that film festivals had always been subjected to classification rules. “Film festivals were previously exempt from classification,” he said. “In 1973 we showed *Performance*, a film with Mick Jagger, banned in Australia in 1970.”

But Stratton said it was not the first time a film had been banned at a festival—the Swedish film *I love you, love* was censored in 1969. The current censorship regime, he said, was making Australia “the laughing stock of the world. Mind you, with John Howard as Prime Minister that’s not such a hard thing.”

Australian Broadcasting Corporation radio commentator Julie Rigg told the meeting: “We have an absolutely intolerable situation in this country now. What was a hard-fought-for system of classification has gradually been eroded by amendments to legislation, introducing a backdoor censorship.”

Rigg said underground copies of *Ken Park* were already being downloaded via the Internet. She referred to Melbourne’s illegal screening the previous night: “The more we have this kind of backdoor censorship, the more people will start to take matters into their own hands. The technology is allowing people to do this.”

David Marr said the Labor Party, which is in government in every Australian state, was also involved in film censorship. “Cheap anti-Howard rhetoric won’t get us too far,” he said. “The censorship of Australian films is a co-operative agenda between state and federal governments. The Labor Party is up to its neck in this as well.”

A unanimous vote to condemn the ban on *Ken Park* concluded the meeting and organisers foreshadowed future attempts to screen the film. Hundreds of people lined up to sign a petition to the federal and state attorneys general, asserting the right of adults to “read, hear and see what they want”. Members and supporters of the Socialist Equality Party distributed copies of a WSWS article opposing the *Ken Park* ban and exposing the political nature of the OFLC’s decision.

The Balmain Town Hall meeting indicates a developing movement, especially among young people, against the Howard government’s censorship regime, which is part of a broader attack on democratic rights that includes the new ASIO laws and the incarceration of refugees. The Labor Party has backed the entire agenda.

A WSWS reporter spoke to Ryan Smith, a young filmmaker, who said: “We object to the paternalistic policies of the government. We don’t feel we should be dictated to and pandered to. We should make our own decisions about

what we can and can’t see. I think there’s a groundswell of people who believe that what is happening is wrong and I think that tonight is a manifestation of that. It’s indicative of a general malaise in the political climate of the world that we’re veering toward this dangerous conservatism that is curtailing basic freedoms.”

Chloe Schwank said: “I came tonight because I’m writing a play on very similar issues concerning teenage sexuality. We already have scenes in this play depicting simulated sex between teenagers. Nobody would ban a play, or I don’t know how because as far as I know plays aren’t classified. How stupid and hypocritical that distinction is.

“I’ve only lived in Australia for a short time. I’m from Austria, one of the countries where the film has been commercially released, and I have never ever been anywhere—and I’ve studied in London—where a film has been banned. I’ve been here a year now and *Ken Park* and *Baise Moi* have both been banned. And I can’t believe that it’s possible in a democratic society, especially one like Australia, which is less conservative and less religious than Austria, which is ruled by the far right. I think that it is just part of the general shutting down of civil liberties in America and here.”

Barnaby Norris, a film student at the University of Technology Sydney, said he attended the meeting “as a show of solidarity, to support the movement and the sentiments that have been expressed here tonight”.

“Censoring is a personal thing and censoring oneself is probably the most apt form of censorship, considering we’re all adults and we all know what we want to see and what we don’t want to see.

“Obviously this meeting isn’t just about *Ken Park*. It is the first time a film has been banned before it has even been screened. *Baise Moi* was screened for a while. This film is an upfront symbol. So whether it’s a good film or a bad film, or whether it has artistic merit or is schlock, is kind of irrelevant.”



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