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The pursuit of innocence: Youth and censorship

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The Pursuit of Innocence

Youth and Censorship

SARA DIAMOND

WE ARE TEETERING ON THE brink of video censorship in British Columbia. The legislature convenes in mid-March, and the Attorney-General promises to enact video classification and censorship when the session begins. The new law will require all video distributors to take out a license, to submit tapes in their collections and those newly acquired for "classification and censorship." Classification will divide the "adult" material from video "appropriate" for youth or children to view. Several categories of images will be unilaterally censored: material that shows sexuality and coercion, "unnatural acts," torture or dismemberment, and sex involving youth. It is not yet clear whether historical, documentary or video art work or specific screening contexts will be exempted.

In response, *The Coalition For The Right To View* has formed, comprised of artists, video producers and distributors, writers, feminists, gays, lesbians, civil libertarians and concerned individuals. It opposes all Canadian censorship legislation, including current seizures of gay and lesbian material by Canada Customs. It has issued press releases, done educational spots on television and radio and is currently organizing a series of public screenings of material banned in other contexts or potentially banned or cut in British Columbia. The screenings, while a challenge to the law, will continue the dissemination of alternate images begun by the recent conference, *The Heat Is On, Women on Art on Sex*.

The issue has emerged in a different light than the fight against censorship in Ontario. In B.C., legislation is being developed, in part in response to feminist agitation. The debates are less about the abuses of an existing censorship board, for the B.C. film classification board has been lenient

to date, than about the nature of pornography, whether state censorship works to end sexual inequality and violence and what kind of legislation, if any, is needed.

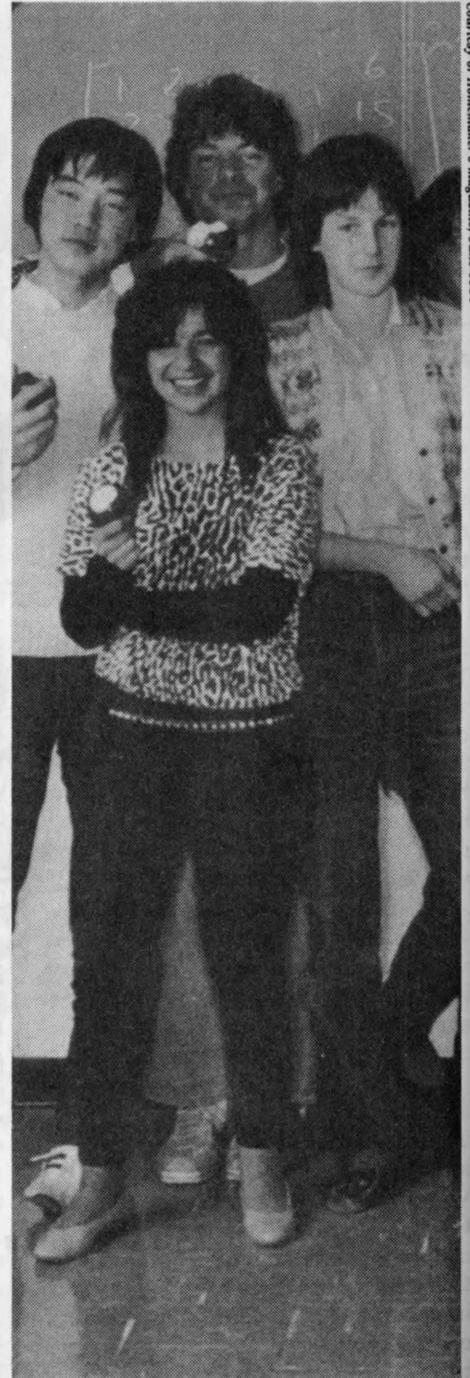
Recently, the debate has centred on the treatment of youth sexuality and "society's" (adult) responsibility to youth. Emotions run high in this discussion, for it is concurrent with a series of high profile sexual abuse

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cases. Some people in the anti-censorship movement are now drawing lines between images involving adults and those involving children. They argue that adults have consented to be represented in pornography while children, who do not have full rights and obligations are there through coercion. This argument about the content of pornography is often extended to the right to view. Some adults support restricting young people's access to sexual images.

This perspective seems counterproductive. Realistically, kiddy porn is a minority genre in Canada — on the most basic level, why screen and classify everything if it is only to arrest .05% of images? The use of children to make pornography is coercive, because children have no rights or power in this culture. However, coercion can also exist within the industry in regards to adult women. This is the area where strong legislation and enforcement of existing laws are needed.

Action against the sexual abuse of children, including the making of pornography — already illegal — and against sexual and other violence against women is critical. No one in the

Courtesy of *Homemaker's* magazine, June 1984

anti-censorship movement argues against anti-violence or anti-abuse legislation.

However, embedded in Canadian law are punitive and misogynist attitudes towards sexuality. With the new law C-49, a woman or young person in the sex trade who reports violence is confessing to a crime. Police are more likely to eventually arrest them than their violator or abuser. Wiping C-49 off the books would do more to "protect" women and youth in the sex trade than banning sexualized images of youth.

The problem goes far beyond the issue of coercion. When the state talks about sexual images of young people it collapses images of sexuality between consenting youth and adults. It fails to differentiate in any way between commercial porn, imagery produced by young people — how unthinkable that they might fantasize about sex on their own — sex education resources, commercial and non-commercial writing, video and film that includes youth sexuality as a component. If the Fraser Commission report is implemented, young people (18 and under) in Canada will be banned from access to materials that reflects what they are for the most part already doing. Age of consent laws should be lowered so that they are realistic and cannot be used to harrass sexually active young people.

In a recent report, James Check found that youth between the ages of 12 and 17 are the "primary consumers of pornography in Canada" and 37% of them watch sexually explicit videos at least once a month." Check warns in his study that youth are learning to rape and be violent by watching pornography. — Is he assuming the viewer to be male, despite recent American research indicating that women are the primary consumers of video porn? — He states that "students learn about the social and behavioural aspects of human sexuality from pornography."

This final statement reiterates what anti-censorship forces have long argued: **In the absence of sex education and a variety of erotica oriented to the youth market, young people will turn to pornography for information.** And if porn is their only source of information about sex, then it will have an important place in forming attitudes, especially when it corresponds with attitudes and behaviours learned at



Courtesy of Photography Annual 1985 Edition

home and from adults in positions of authority. Accepting violence against women or rape as a fact of life is not a big surprise given the norms of family life/family violence/sexual violence in the society. It's no real change from my generation.

The solution is not to censor pornography but to make accessible alternative materials about sexuality for youth that are widely distributed and popular. It is to arm young people with the capacity to think critically about all media. We need to provide education and counselling in schools and communities. I have a nightmare in which educational resources about sexual abuse in B.C. are seized in the same way that *Not A Love Story* was banned in Ontario.

Nor is the solution the classification of video. Young people will continue to see video porn at home. Of course the state could consider arresting their parents for letting them view porn, but what about the sanctity of the family,

so often touted by the Social Credit government?! Restricted access, in the already taboo area of sexuality, will only make pornography more desirable. Banning all sexual images of children would further restrict the capacity of young people and supportive adults to discuss sexuality.

The B.C. government reminds us that 51% of the adult population is opposed to sex education in the school or community. No wonder young people consume pornography! Maybe it's time that we asked young people what they want and need in terms of sex education, entertainment and information and give them the resources to develop it. In the meantime, we need to resist all forms of state censorship, including classification.

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