

SUBMISSION TO THE SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE  
CINEMATOGRAPHIC FILMS BILL AND THE  
CINEMATOGRAPHIC FILMS AMENDMENT BILL

by the  
New Zealand Psychological Society

A. INTRODUCTION

1. In the public interest the New Zealand Psychological Society wishes to place before the Select Committee on the Cinematographic Films Bill and Cinematographic Films Amendment Bill its submissions concerning the known effects of watching film of activities of a sexual or violent nature.

2. The Society does not have direct information available to it concerning the effects of censorship itself. We make no claim concerning the aesthetic issue in censorship of film. We do not wish to enter a debate on moral grounds for we have no particular moral stance to assert or affirm. We do, however, consider that any such debate should be illuminated by the considerable body of psychological research to which we will refer.

3. Though we recognise that the Committee is primarily interested in the effects of watching cine film we have been able to draw on a wider body of data concerning exposure to other forms of erotica and to television media. With some care, we think it is possible to utilise these data.

4. We are not particularly concerned with nor impressed by putative effects on attitudes. It seems to us that such effects are private and not of public concern.

For example, exposure to erotica is known to increase the frequency of erotic dreams and the intensity of the erotic content of them, to increase sexual fantasies in both males and females. No causal link has been established, of a general kind, between such effects and behaviour.

It seems to us that effects on behaviour are the sole data of a psychological kind to which the Committee should attend.

We know, for example, that following exposure to erotic materials most people report no behavioural effects at all. They may express *views* about such material but these are of no public consequence and lie in the realm of personal privacy into which the State has no right of intrusion. Whether or not a person chooses to indulge in fantasies or enjoy erotic dreams is not a matter of legislation.

In the major U.S. report on these matters (Lockhart, 1970) this distinction between opinion and attitude on the one hand and behaviour on the other is not sharply or clearly drawn and the result is very confusing indeed.

It is, for example, of no practical value whatsoever, to have the information that in a survey of the opinions of police chiefs, 58% believed that obscene books played a significant role in causing juvenile delinquency. Such people have no scientific credentials to evaluate causal links, certainly have little or no understanding of the tremendous scientific problems in establishing any such links, and are as totally ignorant as anyone also of either the frequency or use of obscene literature by non-delinquent youths or the causes of delinquent acts that go undetected.

We warn the Committee against subtle but often persuasive opinion couched as though scientifically derived but having, in fact, no known basis in data.

5. We are also anxious that the Committee keep in mind that base rates of behaviour have particular distributions and characteristics. For example the Lockhart report states that:

Research also shows that young persons are more likely to be aroused by erotica than are older persons. Persons who are college educated, religiously inactive and sexually experienced are more likely to report arousal than persons who are less educated, religiously active and sexually inexperienced.

Elsewhere they cite evidence that married couples engage in higher rates of sexual activity after exposure to erotica than do single people.

But the college educated, religiously inactive, sexual experienced and married population are more generally sexually active anyway. The increment from viewing erotica is not significant. Furthermore, the sexually active are simply more likely to be willing to report effects than those who are not.

## B. FILM AND SEXUAL AROUSAL

1. Sexual behaviour in the human species is generally highly stable once mature or adult patterns have been established. We could cite considerable clinical literature to show how specific detailed and elaborate methods must be to effect changes in individually preferred stimuli, patterns of arousal, frequency and strength of response and feelings about these.

Something as ephemeral as cinema attendance fails entirely to fulfil the known conditions for successful behaviour change.

2. Film is almost universally regarded by adults as a form of fantasy and as such is only related to reality in very special ways, (e.g., as a satirical or symbolic commentary).

3. Exposure to erotic material may increase rates of sexual behaviour for some individuals but these follow the preferred mode of sexual expression, e.g., those regularly masturbating may masturbate in response. In any case all such effects appear to be transitory.

4. Repeated exposure leads to habituation or boredom. (Sonenschein, 1969; Howard *et al.*, 1970; Reifler, *et al.*, 1970).

5. Over time, in the U.S.A., where there has been a marked increase in availability of erotic materials, no clear association between this trend and sexual offences has been established (Lockhart, 1970, p. 27) and "the massive overall increases in sex crimes that have been alleged do not seem to have occurred". The same appears to be true of other countries also. There is no reliable evidence to date that exposure to explicit sexual materials plays a significant role in the causation of delinquent or criminal behaviour among youth or adults.

6. In contrast, there is evidence which indicates that the easy availability of pornography in Denmark led to a *decrease* in the sexual offence of child molestation (Kutchinsky, 1973). There is no guarantee that increasing the availability of pornography would lead to the same result in *all* other countries, as there are undoubtedly many other factors influencing the rate of child molestation. However, there is little doubt that an increase in the availability of erotic films would not lead to an increase in anti-social sexual behaviour.

7. While many of the adult population believe that sexual materials excite people sexually (in Abelson *et al.*, 1970, the figure was 67%), only 17% of these same people report having been so excited or aroused. It seems that this is something that is likely to happen to someone else, rarely to oneself.

8. Kinsey (1953), however, reports that for his very large samples, 64% of males and 52% of females had never experienced arousal from erotic material in commercial film, showing as much as anything, that this kind of information is rather untrustworthy. Abelson's data shows considerably fewer "arousal" responses.

9. Objective measures (such as blood pressure, heart beat rates, penile volume) reveal that erotic film produces some evidence of arousal in substantial portions of the population (males 86%, females 65%; Schmidt and Sigusch, 1970). The research of Mann and his associates (1971), with married couples, showed less response (57% for males, 59% for females), and two other studies replicate these findings. The stimulus material in all these studies was hard-core pornographic film.

10. We conclude that there is no doubt that filmed eroticism of the hard core kind will cause arousal in a substantial proportion of the population but that the consequences of this are insignificant (Mosher, 1971).

### C. FILM AND SEX CRIMES

Overwhelmingly the evidence suggests that sex criminals report much later ages of contact with erotic materials, including film, and less contact, than either other criminals or non-criminal adolescents (Cook and Fosen, 1970; Walker, 1970). In particular paedophiles and rapists report very low exposures to photographic depictions of coitus. (Goldstein, *et al.*, 1970). While there appears to be no research (for obvious

reasons) investigating the effects of viewing erotic films by children of various ages, there have been no documented cases of children experiencing permanent psychological harm after viewing such material. However, it is quite likely that children who have been taught that all sexual behaviour is wrong, would have transient negative reactions after viewing erotic films, just as some people have transient negative reactions to certain swear-words they have been taught to regard as bad.

#### D. OVERALL CONCLUSIONS: FILM AND SEX

On the basis of experimental evidence we can report no firm body of data which might show that observing filmed sex acts has any corrupting effect whatsoever. There are, therefore, no empirical grounds on which censorship can be based. Censorship is clearly therefore, a political act based on non-empirical grounds. We know of no empirical justification for such views as are frequently expressed that pornographic film depraves, corrupts, leads to family breakdown or demoralised individuals, institutions or the state of the nation.

It may well be that political grounds justifying censorship can be found. To discuss this is beyond our competence.

We would, however, caution that the known effects of hard-core erotic film, produced to satisfy the market for erotic titillation has no particular value in sexual education. Such viewing may further increase callous attitudes towards sexual performance and relationships; those who seek to view such material tend to be those whose attitudes are already this way. No case for the desirability of hard core pornography has yet to our knowledge been made.

On the other hand serious film may well have educative informative and humanising effects. For this reason we would regard restrictive certificates as more desirable than the use of scissors as limiting or controlling means of reducing the exposure of the very young to experiences beyond their capacity to assimilate or absorb.

#### E. FILM VIOLENCE AND AGGRESSION

There have been a large number of studies which have investigated the effects of viewing film violence either through the medium of television or cinematographic film. As there is no evidence that the same films presented via the two media, have different effects on behaviour, the research on both film and television violence is relevant here.

One of the most comprehensive reports on the effects of film violence on behaviour was that of the U.S. Surgeon General's Scientific Advisory Committee on Television and Social Behaviour (1971). Although the summary volume of this report (Television and Growing Up; The Impact of Televised Violence) is stated in rather cautious terms, the five volumes of detailed research provide results which strongly suggest that television violence contributes to aggression in children and violence in society (Goranson, 1975).

One of the editors of the report commented that "the major implication of the results of this research programme is the clear need for a reduction in the level of violence portrayed on television" (Murray, 1973). One study has examined the long-term effects of exposure to televised violence, over a 10-year period (Eron *et al.*, 1972). The researchers found a highly significant relationship between preference for viewing violent programmes at eight years and subsequent aggressive behaviour at 18 years.

Subsequent research which has specifically examined the effects of movie violence on aggressive behaviour has strongly supported the earlier findings, based on television viewing, that watching violent films leads to an increase in aggressive behaviour among some of the viewers both short and long-term, among children and adolescents (e.g., Leyens, *et al.*, 1975; Noble, 1973; Meyer, 1972).

#### F. CONCLUSIONS REGARDING FILM VIOLENCE AND ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR

1. The large majority of the research evidence indicates that there probably is a causal relationship between the amount of film violence viewed and subsequent aggressive or anti-social behaviour both among children and adults. Although not everyone who views film violence will become aggressive there is little doubt that viewing film violence leads to an increase in aggressive behaviour in some people.
2. Constant exposure to film violence probably has an inoculation or desensitization effect for many people, such that subsequent viewing of film violence creates less physiological and psychological reaction. Such desensitization may be regarded as socially undesirable where it increases the probability of "senseless" violence in the community.
3. Specific films may present novel and unique forms of aggressive behaviour providing models which are directly imitated by some people. The increase in specific types of aggressive behaviour following the showing of "Kung Fu" and "Karate" films provide examples of this effect.
4. Research evidence has shown that the more realistic film violence is, the more likely it is to lead to subsequent aggressive behaviour (e.g., Noble, 1973).
5. While it would be unrealistic, and perhaps unwise to completely eliminate film violence for public audiences there now appears little doubt that the overall amount of violence viewed by people is one of the determinants of the level of anti-social, aggressive behaviour in the community. Thus, except for films which show extremely vicious detailed or novel forms of violence, the banning of a few films depicting violence is unlikely to have much effect on the general level of aggression in the community. However, the deletion of scenes of extreme or novel violence may prevent some antisocial behaviour.

More general measures may be needed if a decision is made to reduce the overall number of violent films viewed by the community. Such measures might include greater use of the R18 classification for films containing 10% or more of the time devoted to the depiction of "realistic" violence. Another possibility is the institution of a "violence tax" on all films containing over a certain proportion of violence; in this case it would become more expensive for both film distributors and the viewing public to have access to a high proportion of violent films. Such a tax, while discouraging a high proportion of violent films, would give both the film distributors and the members of the public the opportunity to choose to show or view films, which although violent, were regarded as having other redeeming features, such as artistic merit.

Another finding has been that children who have had a history of exposure to television violence show less physiological reaction to filmed violence than children with little previous exposure to violence (Cline, *et al.*, 1973). This "desensitization" effect may be viewed as socially undesirable where people come to accept violence with little or no emotional reaction to it. As has been pointed out elsewhere, such people can easily be persuaded to commit violent acts on others without feeling guilt or abhorrence towards the violence (Kelman, 1973).

In his 1969 report, *Television in the Lives of our children*, Wilbur Schramm reports that aggression is higher in heavy T.V. viewers, that violence on T.V. may stimulate aggression in an already aggressive child, that when aggression in a real life situation is at a sufficient height the child remembers how aggressive acts were done on T.V., that older boys use of T.V. violence tends to be fairly realistic, and that when they have found on T.V. an effective way to do something, they may adopt it, and that they identify with a character working out his aggressions on T.V. and remember what he does. Zajonc (1954) concluded "children will prefer to imitate a strong villain than a weak hero".

Bandura's studies of social imitation confirm the likelihood that children exposed to filmed violence may adopt it as appropriate behaviour (Bandura, *et al.*, 1963).

In a sequence of studies Berkowitz *et al.* (1963, 1966) has shown that both children and adults show increased tendencies to act violently after viewing filmed violence, especially if they were aggressively aroused *before* such viewing. Since there are many irritations and frustrations in ordinary life which lead to such arousal, these findings are of some importance.

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