

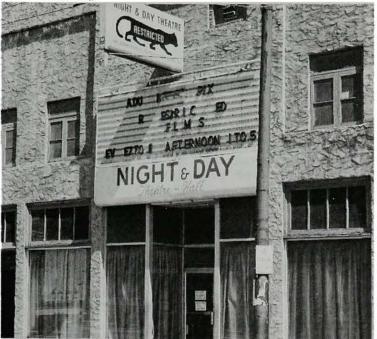
Doorway of a Vancouver store selling pornographic books and movies. The black B.C. cougar has become widely accepted as a symbol for "adult" merchandise and is no longer limited to its original use in advertising for theatrical motion pictures.

film censorship: guidance or control?

by Ben Achtenberg

In late September, motion picture censors from throughout Canada met in Vancouver to talk over the theory and practise of "film classification." A recent interview with British Columbia's Classification Director, R.W. MacDonald, touched on some of the problems and issues that were discussed at that meeting and clarified the way the present system of government movie monitoring works in the Pacific Province.

photo: Ben Achtenberg



Facade of the Night and Day Theater in Vancouver, mentioned in interview. Shows use of the B.C. cougar, symbol for the "Restricted" category, as an advertisement rather than a warning.

MacDonald, who has been with the classification office for twenty-five years, must personally see and approve all films which are to be publicly shown in B.C. The office was first set up by statute in 1913:

MacDonald: The first revision of the act was in 1970, so that's the one we're working under right now. We dropped the term censorship — not that we've dropped the power, but we try to emphasize classification rather than the old idea of censorship. I can still prevent a film from being shown if I want, but what we try to do is find a way that as many pictures as possible can be presented to the public from which they may make their choices. In 1931 there were 74 pictures that were not approved. Last year we saw 1125 pictures and, of that, only 14 were not approved.

As the years went by we gradually tried to lay more stress on the informative value of classification. We have three categories: general, mature and restricted; to augment that, this was the first province to come up with the warning captions which offer further information about particular pictures, so that people can take these facts into consideration when making their decisions.

"Mature: Some frightening and gory scenes" (Jaws)

"Mature: Coarse language and swearing" (Funny Lady)

"Restricted Warning: Many disgusting brutal scenes" (Warhol's Frankenstein)

"Drug taking, violence, coarse language throughout" (French Connection II)

"Mature: Very coarse language"

(A Brief Vacation)

"A very frightening picture; some extremely coarse language"

(The Exorcist)

"General, Children" (Bambi)

 examples of R.W. MacDonald's captions for some recent films Even if you're not calling it censorship anymore, isn't it still true that if you don't approve a film it can't be shown — and therefore people can't see it?

MacDonald: Yeah, it can't be shown. Well, the distributor could appeal it; we do have an appeal board, but they haven't appealed a classification for years. Usually these films are of such a character that even the most liberal-minded person would say it's a complete washout anyway. There's no story, you know; it's just completely sex from one end to the other, with maybe some violence thrown in or something. The entertainment value is extremely low, except to a very small proportion of the public. Of course, I suppose those people are being denied their rights, but if we had a fourth category maybe we could take care of them too.

It also depends on how a picture is advertised and handled. You know, the attitude I had in the beginning was that if a picture was approved it should be able to show any place, but I've changed my ideas on that. It has evolved in my time that certain theatres have begun to build up a clientele of people who expect to see a certain type of picture that you wouldn't see in any everyday theatre. These theatres can get away with showing certain kinds of pictures, and I have no complaints from their patrons. The Eve theatres are an example of this. We have some others that are probably a little stronger, we have some that show soft-core pornography, simulated sexual intercourse...



"Is the Director a privileged person that he may remain unsullied by those pictures which he does not approve for the public?

The Director is not the guardian of the public morals, as this question implies. He does not attempt to assess any possible damage a picture might do to the morals of the average adult person. Instead, he bases his decision on the potential offensiveness of such a picture to a large portion of the public."

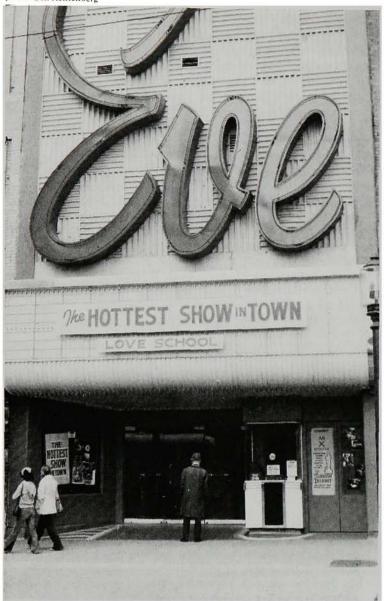
"Why am I not allowed to decide for myself what pictures I wish to see?

The approval of the Director is not to be construed as permission for you to see a picture. It is in fact permission to an exhibitor to show a picture to the public. You still make the decision, with the advantages provided by the Director."

- from **Film Classification**, a pamphlet by R.W. MacDonald

While the seldom-used Appeal Board is appointed by the Lieutenant Governor in Council, Film Classification Director is a Civil Service position. In addition to classifying films and deciding which can or cannot be shown, the Director may edit out scenes that he doesn't consider suitable for public showing. He must also see and approve all advertising for films and can require ads to include his warning captions as well as the classification. ("Restricted" films must also display the warning symbol of a black B.C. cougar.) The Director also has the very crucial power to issue (or refuse to issue) licenses to film exchanges and theatres which wish to operate in the province.

MacDonald: We have five people all told in this office. There's myself and two Assistant Directors of Classification, a clerk and a projectionist. I've been here for quite awhile, since back in 1950. I was appointed by the coalition government that we had at that time. They were defeated just two years after that and the SoCred government was in for about 20 years, and then the NDP came in.



Facade of Vancouver's Eve Theatre on the new Granville Mall. The theatre shows softcore pornography and has its own specialized clientele.

What were your qualifications for the job? Did you have a background in the film industry or what?

MacDonald: I've been here 25 years; what more can I say. No I wasn't involved in film. I got the job through a friend who knew that my predecessor was looking for somebody to replace him. Before that I worked with the Treasury Office of the National Harbours Board, and before that the war was on and I was in the Navy.

The lady before me was the stenographer and she was promoted to be the assistant to Mr. Hughes, who was Director at that time. This was before the day of women's lib; at that time it was totally inconceivable that she should take over the Director's job. There was another fellow, a school principal, and I came in to make a fourth. After he and the Director resigned there was just two of us for the best part of 20 years and that was a terrible strain, so I kept after the government and after many years I finally got through to them. The younger fellow here now, Mr. Casey, is 20 years old, a graduate of Simon Fraser University. We had a Civil Service competition with about 80 applicants and he was first. He's very up to date in his views and all that. He understands the philosophy of the thing very well.

We have differences of opinion on a film sometimes, but I'm in the happy position that I'm the one that counts. But I certainly do listen to them; sometimes it takes a little longer than others to reach a decision, but most times we agree on the category.

9(2)(a) General, being suitable for all persons; (b) Adult, being unsuitable for or of no interest to persons under the age of eighteen years; (c) Restricted, being suitable only for persons of the age of eighteen years or over.

An Act Respecting Motion Pictures

Chapter 27, 3 April, 1970 (emphasis added)

"General Entertainment... should contain nothing that ought to offend any normal individual or group... the 'Mature Entertainment' category advises parents that the Director considers such pictures unsuitable for children... The 'Restricted Entertainment' category was introduced in 1961 as an answer to the challenge of frank and realistic modes of expression... The underaged person must be accompanied by a parent or other responsible adult who will sign a special form accepting responsibility for their attendance and who must remain with them during the entire showing of the picture.

 from Film Classification, by R.W. MacDonald

The categories are set up in the legislation and the amendments to it. All I can do is make recommendations. If my recommendations were accepted, why, we would have a fourth category and the age for "restricted" would be dropped to sixteen, and there are a couple of other things I would like to get.

We have three categories of classification and for years I've been trying to get a fourth category. I'll give you an example of the reason for that: I said that last year we didn't approve 14 out of 1125 films. Now it's a possibility that if we had a fourth category, most of those that were not approved could be put into that category. The reason these films were not approved is that I feel that each category has a certain informative value to the public. Now if you take the restricted category and throw every picture into it, well, people aren't going to have any range of idea as to what this is all about, you see. It could be anything from a film that totally would outrage certain people to something that's really not so bad at all. So there's not enough range there and I would like to see a fourth category. Some of the films that are in the restricted category now I would probably also put in the fourth category.

So you would really like to do away with the traditional kind of censorship altogether?

MacDonald: Yes, I think eventually we could get over to a system of complete classification.



"A system of classification aims to protect without limiting freedom. The power to prohibit, irrespective of how often or how seldom it is exercised, limits freedom, and it limits freedom of a very special kind... the power [of citizens] to decide for themselves what they shall read, hear or see."

B.C. Civil Liberties Association

March, 1972 (emphasis added)

Do you have specific criteria in mind in deciding what category to put a film into, or whether to approve a film, or does

it just depend on your immediate reaction when you look at a film?

MacDonald: It's entirely on the basis of my reaction, and the first time you see it is more important than any subsequent time. If I have to see a picture two or three times, it's never the same. I have to bear in mind that my first impression is more reliable than the others, because that's the impression that most of the public will get.

When I look at a show I'm not looking for anything: I'm waiting for the picture to do something to me, you see, and I'm really relying on my own reaction and the reaction of my two associates. If the picture is such that we have to discuss it we may talk over how we will word the caption and things like that. But we're not looking for specific things in the picture; I don't think it's possible to operate that way.

Do you ever base your decisions on classification on is-

sues other than drugs, sex and violence?

MacDonald: No, I don't think so, although there's the possibility of it. In times past people making fun of religion used to be a problem, and racism too, but racism has never been a big point with us. I've had some black people phone up about certain pictures; I think some of them are a little oversensitive. There was one just the other day, Mandingo; they were complaining that it was racist. Well it dealt with racism, but I wouldn't say it was racist to the point of being offensive to black people, because it was more or less documentary in showing things the way they were. What I would call racism is if they really demeaned these people by saying, "Well, they're really getting what they deserve by being treated this way." That would be another matter. We could take that into consideration, we could even throw a film out for that. We do have that power. Anything that would offend the public.

Usually, though, when a film is not approved or restricted it has to do with explicit sex; sometimes with violence, but with violence we tend to rely on the warning. It's a funny thing, people who are turned off by violence usually don't mind sex, and vice versa; people who are completely turned off by sexual content don't seem to mind violence too much. I don't know if there's a psychological fact involved in this,

but I have noticed it.

Can individuals still lay charges of obscenity against films that you have classified?

MacDonald: We've had a number of pictures where somebody filed a complaint and then the morality squad decided to lay a criminal charge. The last one they did that with was Oh, Calcutta. Now Oh, Calcutta was a filmed stage play and it's really more or less just a risqué picture because there's very little nudity and that sort of thing. We get pictures far more explicit in a sexual way. Actually it was really a lot of fun, you know; that's the way I looked at it. But somebody over in Victoria complained and as usual the police went in and seized the print.

But at that time we had the new NDP government in and my boss, Attorney General Alex Macdonald, as I understand it, told them they were not to prosecute. He said, "Give the picture back; we're finished with that; we have a machinery in this province to take care of this matter of censorship and as far as I'm concerned that's it, you're not to prose-

cute." So they put it back in the theatres.

It had had very indifferent success here in town incidentally; in Vancouver it was only about four weeks, and it wasn't doing that well in Victoria, but I think they got about six or eight months out of it after the word got around, you know. It's the best publicity in the world.

So Alex Macdonald relies on us and that seems to me the most logical thing. If we have a classification office, what's all the fuss about? And in general I think the thing works very well. I'd like to see some improvements on it of course, but that's up to the government.

10.5 Before approving any advertising in connection with a film the Director may order that a warning caption be displayed in all such advertising and thereupon the words supplied by the Director shall be used in all such advertising.

> Motion Pictures Act B.C. Reg. 221/70 20 August 1970

A number of the theatres around town appear to be using your warning captions as advertisements instead of warnings. How do you feel about that?

MacDonald: I've been criticized for these captions for just the reason you said: "All you're doing is advertising the picture." Well, if that is a side effect, OK, but I'm not concerned with it. The thing which concerns me has taken place, that people have been adequately warned. Now if some people want to use those warnings as an indication to that they're going to like this picture, well, why shouldn't they. They're adult people; if they go there and are upset or something, they knew in advance. A lot of these pictures, especially at the Eve, are completely concerned with sex and that's the usual caption we put on them.



"A hard-won principle which has been established in Canadian, British and American courts is that a film or book is to be judged as a whole and not on the basis of its individual parts alone... The power given to the Director to use his scissors to cut is one which easily erodes and threatens this principle... the Director is given an unusual power over the film distributor, and one which we regard as highly dangerous. If he can cut, he can negotiate and lay down conditions... What is more, he practices this office outside the public view... Far more menacing than the power of post censorship is that of prior censorship... which is not essentially public, which is in the hands of an administrative officer and not the courts, and which encourages that officer to see his desk as that of an editor.'

> B.C. Civil Liberties Association March, 1972

As far as cutting is concerned, the only thing that I have ever troubled to do anything with for quite a while now is oral sex. We don't allow that in. It's totally illogical but, well, I've got to do something. When you've only got three categories to work with, what can I do?

We've taken the policy of not allowing oral sex, and that's about the only thing that's removed. It does sometimes happen that there will be a cut to get a film from the restricted category into mature, or from mature to general, but very rarely. If I've restricted a picture and they say "Well, we'd do better with this in mature; is there anything we can do? If we took out this and that would it be OK?", often I'll agree. We're sort of bargaining, the distributor or exhibitor and ourselves.

Do you get any feedback from the film audience?

MacDonald: We get very very few audience complaints. If I get four complaints about a picture, that to me is a flood of complaints. But I suppose there must be an awful lot of other people who would have complained but don't want to go to that trouble. You do think about those things, and I have

changed classifications from mature to restricted on two or three occasions because of people's complaints that they went there with their children and it was no picture for kids to see. I can't think of any examples right now; I'm terrible for titles.

Somebody takes his wife and kids to see a show and if there's no classification on it they're going to perhaps be shocked by what they see. If there wasn't anything to warn them I think they'd have a legitimate complaint. It's an area of shock; they're taken by surprise. But if we put a classification on it, and we augment the classification by a warning caption that gives them something to go on, if they still go to see this show they haven't got anybody to blame but themselves if they're offended or upset.

The people who are upset more than anybody are the men; it's usually the man that's embarrassed in front of his wife and children. I don't know why this is, but that's my experience, the way I've seen it over the years. Sure, women can be upset too, but I think men are far more... It's the fact that they have been personally embarrassed more than anything else that causes the complaints.

And as I say, we have an unwritten agreement with the theatres about where a film can be shown. The distributor Cinepix has these Eve theatres all over the country and they have their own clientele, so there's no problem. Or the Golden Slipper downtown, or the Night and Day Theatre on Main Street. They have their own clientele, you know, a bunch of loggers that come from up-country. They come down, and they're usually unattached males, though we do get some couples that go in to see these pictures.

And they're nothing from start to finish but this flimsy little story — maybe you've seen some of them yourself in your time. They'll start off with the guy stripping the girl's clothes off and they get very intimate and they might have a bit of oral sex there — which I usually cut out — and then he's lying on top of her and her legs are spread and they go through all the motions. And it's just one thing after another and then another girl comes in and then this guy's got two girls working on him, you see, and then this girl goes off somewhere and maybe she gets a lesbian scene. And finally for some reason they all get together for an orgy and that's the finale of the picture. I could write these things in five minutes, and there's just one after the other like that.

But the people who go to them don't mind, they want to see this kind of thing. They're content to pay their money to see it, and nobody's hurt because nobody goes in there with his family. I think they have a place in society, though their place should be very well delineated. Nobody should be inveigled into seeing something that they don't want to see, or through somebody's neglect go in and see something that they don't want to see. I think that if you take care of that aspect of it things should work out. What's obscene to one person may not be obscene at all to somebody else.

You get used to it after a while. I get almost all the films. I must have seen in excess of 20,000 I suppose; I tried to figure it out at one time.

You know this job has got to be experimental, you've got to be always trying something. You're supposed to be able to find out what the general acceptance of the public is, in which case you've got to go out and contact the public as much as possible. And even then you don't know for sure, so it's always sort of experimental in a way.

I think the more people know about what we do and why we do it, the more effective we're going to be. I go and talk to schools and universities, to the service clubs like Kiwanis and Rotary and things like that. I go on the hotline shows — it's quite a little challenge, keeps you sharp to have to explain what you're doing and meet people's complaints. It keeps the thing alive. I'll talk about pictures and my work any day. I've involved myself with it totally.

POSTSCRIPT

by Ben Achtenberg

MacDonald appears to have used his powers as British Columbia's Classification Director with moderation and intelligence, at least in recent years. But there is no sure guarantee that his attitudes will remain the same, or that his successors in office will share the same attitudes. The troublesome fact remains that the Province's censorship law provides extremely broad powers to edit films or prevent them from being shown on the basis of anything the Director thinks might cause "offense" to the "normal" public. While MacDonald has limited his concern to sex and violence, nothing prevents a later Director from cutting or banning films because of their political or social content. And despite the fact that MacDonald favors getting away from censorship and using classification instead, in practice the fact that a large number of films are placed in the "restricted" category means that most teenagers never get to see them. (How many high school age kids are willing to take their parents along on a date?)

The B.C. Director of Classification doesn't have to be – and MacDonald isn't – a trained filmmaker or editor. He may be an intelligent and perceptive viewer but cannot be expected to understand the way the parts of a particular film work together in the way that its "author" can. When the censor cuts a film the filmmaker is robbed of the right to have the integrity of his or her work preserved, and the public is prevented from seeing the work as a whole. The distributors are not interested in protecting the film from cutting; they are anxious to go along with anything that will help them get a "better" classification. The Director can and does use his power to negotiate with the distributors, and water down films as he sees fit.

The B.C. Civil Liberties Association has urged the censors assembled in Vancouver to do away with censorship and limit themselves to classification. In many of his statements, Mr. MacDonald appears to sympathize with this point of view.

But why should the government be in the business of film criticism at all? A government official who has the power to classify still has, even if to a lesser degree, the power to coerce. This is doubly true so long as he also has the enormous clout that results if he is in charge of granting licenses to distributors and theaters. Even if he can't actually edit or eliminate films, he can still make it clear to theatre operators that if they persist in showing pictures he doesn't approve of their licenses will be in danger. Some people might feel this is OK as long as it is only being used to keep hardcore pornography out of the neighborhood theaters, but nothing prevents a future Director from deciding that social criticism or political controversy is also too "offensive" to be shown to the general public.

Film criticism should be left to critics. The government has no proper role in the process of judging what communications people should be free to see, hear or read.

Freelance filmmaker Ben Achtenberg graduated from Harvard College and has an M.A. in Communications from the University of Pennsylvania. He is deeply involved in community organizing and with media questions. Author of The Cable Book: Community Television for Massachusetts, he contributes regularly to teleVISIONS. He has also worked in all phases of film production and has extensive experience in video and photography.



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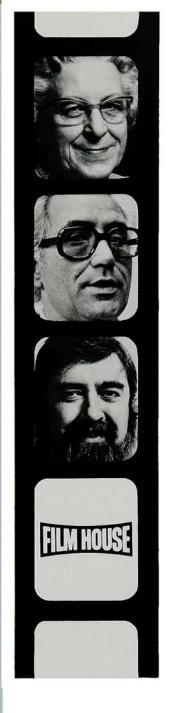
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Len Baker, Laboratory Supervisor

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Ron Morby, Product Control Supervisor.

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First, some of the people

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Fourteen years scheduling and expediting at CBC. Dorothy traffics the flow of all sound work, bookings, shipping and costing.

Clarke DaPrato, Mixer and Manager, Sound Department. Thirty years' experience in the art, including nineteen years as Chief of Sound for the National Film Board.

Paul Coombe, Mixer and Assistant Manager.

Seventeen years in the industry, Paul is favourite mixer for many of Canada's commercial and documentary producers.

lan Jacobson, Mixer.
Started with New Zealand
Broadcasting Commission, then to
CBC, then Film House, in 1971. A
fully qualified commercial
re-recording mixer.

Tony van den Akker, Mixer. Began with Cinecentrum in Holland, joined Film House in 1965, has worked in every phase of sound.

Cyril Steckham, Machine and Transfer.
Twenty years with the Rank Organization (Denham labs) in England, and the CBC in Canada, plus 12 years with Film House. Exceptionally thorough knowledge of projection and sound

equipment.

Leo O'Donnell, Technical Director. Started with the Australian Broadcast Commission, joined BBC in 1954, Canadian National Film Board in 1958, Film House in 1973. One of the most inventive sound engineers in North America.

Wilson Markle, Technical Liaison & Sales.
Fourteen years in the industry in

California and Canada, as producer, mixer, editor, engineer, and lab manager, Wilson brings a wealth of TV and film experience to solving clients' film and sound problems.



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Film House has three sound theatres, each with multi-track pickup recorders. Two have narration booths, and one has a complete post-sync effects and dialogue replacement facility. Together they provide the capacity to meet the varying requirements of individual shows, all at one time.

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NAB Cartridge
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track
16mm stripe
16 optical print
35 mm mag — mono, 3 track
4 track, 6 track

Disc SN tapes Mono ½" with Pilotone or without sync
Mono ½" — ½ track
2 track ¼"
16 mm mag — edge or centre track
16 stripe
35 mag stripe
35 mag — 3 track, 4 track,
6 track
16 optical
35 optical
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