

Social ills cannot be Blamed on Media

In the Philippines, the issue of censorship is a continuing battle between the progressive and the conservative forces. The traditional church and the government on the side of the conservatives, argue that the Movie and Television Review and Classification Board (MTRCB), a government regulatory body, protects the morals of the public. The progressive's challenge MTRCB's authority. In recent years, film producer Armida Siguion-Reyna, along with film director son and scriptwriter daughter-in-law, has produced some "controversial" films. Controversial because she has tackled socially relevant subject matters and portrayed them with realistic sensitivity. Her movies have looked at, among others, incest, prostitution and homosexuality. Armida's socio-political films have gone beyond the typical male-dominated perspectives. However, her films usually have a tough time getting MTRCB approval; some are banned, others significantly cut before they are allowed to be shown.

Ligaya, a film about a prostitute, reached the halls of Malacañang and needed the president's endorsement before it could be shown to the public. It was earlier banned by MTRCB. It went on to become the highest-grossing film for 1997, fanning further the debate on censorship.

Armida, a direct and outspoken woman has been at the forefront of the battle against censorship. That is why Annie Calma Santoalla and Luz M. Martinez, of Isis International-Manila, met with her to discuss her views on censorship and other aspects of the film industry.

I: What is the difference between erotica and pornography?



You know just like obscenity, you cannot define it. You cannot define what is obscene. What is obscene for one is not obscene for another. You have to define it from the present-day community standards. Standards, moral values, even though I don't want to call them moral values, reflect present community-based standards. What was forbidden before is acceptable today. Like before you could not talk about living arrangements between a male and a female, much less a gay or lesbian. But now it's accepted.

A sex scene in a movie is not advocacy of sex and violence. You have to look at the whole thing in context. What is the movie saying? What is the article saying?

When I am abroad, for instance, you can access sex channels. That, I would call pornography. There is nothing (even though well-made) in the movie that says anything meaningful or worthwhile. It is just a series of masturbation, sex acts, and complete nudity. It does not propel me into active action for the welfare of any community or any social structure. I think that is how I would distinguish it (pornography): when you watch a film and it propels you to do something about your community so that abuses won't happen no matter how much sex and violence is in that movie, to me that is not pornography.

I: The feminist community does not look at the debate so much as to whether its moral or not but more on the exploitation of women's bodies. Does the exploitation of women's bodies perpetuate the use of sex and violence in films to keep women in the subordinate position? There is one stream of feminists which says censorship should not exist and another stream which says using women's bodies in movies, whether pornographic or not, is sexualising women and is providing bad role models for younger women.

They are no better than the Censor's Board [MTRCB]. For example, if you are doing a story where the story of the film is about a violent society, there has to be violence otherwise you don't get your point across.

If you are just going to say 'prevent child abuse' I will say, okay, I'll prevent child abuse but it does not shock me into the reality that there is child abuse. When you make a movie, I am not remotely suggesting that you put a child there on the table and chop him to pieces. But you have to have scenes that will have a shock-

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scene or not obscene. It really depends. I cannot say that if there is nudity in front of me it's exploitation.

I: If there is no censorship, then what is the ideal way?



I don't believe in censorship. I believe there should be a regulatory body with review and classificatory powers. You have to review and classify the film and be very strict about the classification. It should be an industry regulatory body. It should be up to the industry to police its own ranks, otherwise, the film industry will never mature. It will also teach producers how to target their audience and money.

Censorship has not worked. We have had censorship for I think 60 years. Why are they still saying we have lousy movies, why are they still saying that movies are bold, sexy, and violent? They are the approving powers, why are they saying that after 60 years of censorship our movies are bad and project only what is immoral. Who approved them? Not me.

I: I just read a report from Fiji that even though they follow a classificatory system, they still have a problem with the pirating of the films. Films that are X-rated, pornographic, can be easily seen by anyone. The classification system is fine, but when you have pirating of vid-

eos how do you control it?

You cannot control it. That is why I think today censorship is becoming more and more useless. With cyberspace you can download any film to any home.

I don't know why parents are blaming the ills of society on the movies? Movies don't invent these. It comes from reality. What they reflect. Social ills cannot be blamed on media. I don't think you can accuse media of eroding the moral values, the moral values that you as a parent should teach your children. Going back to the voluntary rating system of the United States. You know that the voluntary rating system sees its job as an advance notice to parents for the movie-going of their children. In other words, if parents don't care about the movie their kids are going to see nothing else is going to matter. You are the only one who could give those values to your kids.

I: Is there in any way we can sensitize how women are treated in films?



That is very, very difficult to answer. It really depends on the producers, directors and the filmmaker. It depends upon the story, the execution of the film, I can put a nude body there and it will not look obscene. But another, well, it boils down to taste. But you cannot legislate this. You cannot even say that people with good taste can only enjoy freedom from censorship. Everybody should enjoy freedom of expression. This film we are doing now is about three lesbians. It's a relationship film. I am sure that there will be another battle with the censors.

I: Do you think that women as film directors are more sensitive to showing a more subtle imagery than men who tend to show images of women in a raw sexual way?

Generally, yes, women can be more delicate in the treatment.

I: What are your thoughts or ideas on the

impact of globalization on the media?

That is progress. You cannot stop it. It is sometimes disadvantageous. For instance, now the Philippine movies are doing badly at the box office. But we are consoling ourselves because the slump is not only in the Philippines but also world wide. There are now other options of entertainment. Before you had only television and movies; you didn't have video games, cable channels, and malls. Before you went to the movies to cool yourself but now you don't have to go to the theater in the mall. The entire mall is a big air-conditioned building.

I also accept the fact that the industry brought this slump unto itself. We stopped respecting the audience. We treated the audience badly. I think that the audience is speaking to the movie industry loud and clear: "we are

tired of your movies, you don't respect us, you are condescending." Sad to say that we should have been at the forefront of raising the standards of the viewing public but did not achieve that. Those who have achieved that are the foreign competitors. Like the videotapes, free TV, paid TV, cable channels, more or less the level of appreciation of the viewing public has been raised. They will expect no less from the Filipino films, not only in the context of stories, but in technical quality. With technical quality your audience can forgive you because you cannot compete with *Independence Day* or *Air Force One* (two popular Hollywood movies recently shown in the Philippines). We don't have enough money. But we have enough money to make small films that reflect the life around us.

I: But you don't think that if you close off the local market, that without foreign influences there will be more opportunity for creativity from the local industry?

Are you asking me if I agree to the idea of limitations of importation? I don't think so. The idea is to compete. I don't think you should limit importation. We also learn a lot and become educated by foreign films.

President Ramos is always saying 'global,

global.' I agree with him. This is the only way we can survive. We have to expand the Philippine market because the producer can no longer recoup the investment from the local market. The cost is going up especially with the devaluation of the peso. It's terrible. But you cannot go global if the creative minds are in prison. We have been oppressed by censorship for 60 years (of those, 14 were under martial law). Who are the writers today? Martial law babies whose minds have been conditioned to control. I have been a judge in several play writing contests. You know who are the martial law babies by their scripts; they have lazy minds. They don't want to explore. Not only laziness, it's more like 'what is the use? It won't pass anyway.' A defeatist attitude. The characters talk the same way, the actors look the same and as if they have been conditioned to write a script that will pass the censors. It has a crippling effect.

I: Some social commentators are saying that we are not increasing the quality of the films but creating more of the same old thing.



Maybe to a certain degree it's not improving the quality of *the* films but it is increasing the level of quality expectations from the audience. That is important. It is not only the filmmakers you have to develop, it's the film audience that you have to build up. You have got to raise the quality of the audience. You cannot do that by giving them garbage. I must admit that there are also some garbage foreign films but generally the technical polish alone is already knowing that they worked hard on this film. Some filmmakers here do poor production but claim this film is for the 'masses' so they (the people) won't notice it, they won't see it. That's a wrong attitude.

I: In 1997 in the film industry we saw a lot of bold (flesh films) movies, and I just noticed that before it was only a monopoly of the established studios but all of sudden there

are several small film outfits, producing one bold film after another.

Correction! I will not call them *bold* films, I will call them "quickies." These are a few producers who for a few centavos will create garbage in the hope of making money. But the sad irony is that the Board of Censors (MTRCB) allows these films. The "quickie" films are the ones that should disappear. But movies, even if they are bold—bold meaning not only skin exposure but also bold statements—these films ought to be encouraged.

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I: A lot of these bold films are featuring really young women. They seem to get younger and younger.

Yes! It's terrible. That is exploitation. You get these girls to do what you want them to do, take off their clothes for 20,000 pesos. Not only that but the contract says that, when the contract expires, the sole option to renew the contract is the producer's. It's terrible! Young males are exploited, except that in our culture, society frowns down more upon women, and it's easier for the men. It's easier for them to survive.

I: What are your hopes for the Filipino film industry?

I really hope that the practitioners of the industry be more disciplined and that the leaders of the industry exercise more professionalism. For the movie workers, I hope that there will be a change of leadership in the industry. Because our industry leaders are weak, they don't have the will to walk along briskly with the developing and changing world. For the government, I wish they would let us off the hook with the censorship and let us regulate our industry. Those are my hopes. ♪