

Young Guards Movin' of the Image

by Marilou Guieb

BAGUIO CITY—The cool citizens of Baguio City in northern Philippines celebrated International Women's Day by setting "hot" pictures on fire. With 'Baguio Women Against Pornography' as the theme, they began the day by making a bonfire of pornographic materials.

As if on cue, the city mayor signed an administrative order creating an Anti-Pornography Task Force Unit for Responsible, Educational and Decent Materials.

The campaign was spurred by the rise in cases of sexual abuse and proliferation of smut materials reported in the city.

City Councilor Lourdes Tabanda, head of the Committee on Child and Family Relationships, recalled an incident in which a 10-year-old boy tried to sexually penetrate his eight-year-old friend while they were playing. He said he had seen the act done on a video show.

A few years ago, Tabanda recounted, city officials were sued by some Baguio residents to force them to confiscate smut materials which were being sold publicly. They tried to excuse their inaction by claiming that there is no definition of just what pornography is, Tabanda explained. She hopes to plug that loophole with a city ordinance authored by her, namely the Indecent Publication Material or Devise Regulatory Act.

But what of the movies? Suggestive film titles are meant to lure curious adolescents to moviehouses. At no time has the principle of freedom of expression resulted in so many dilemmas as in today's hi-tech age.

How does one keep the delicate balance between film experience and growing up right? It is a question that Armida Siguion-Reyna, chair of the Movie and Television Review and



A poster from a sex-oriented movie shown recently in the Philippines.

Classification Board (MTRCB), and Celine Madamba, Commissioner of the National Youth Commission (NYC) must resolve every day.

Siguion-Reyna feels that it's best to give a film-maker the full freedom to tell a story. Censorship deprives the public of their right to experience the film in its fullness.

A 1997 study revealed that 99 percent of young Filipinos turn to media for leisure and information activities. Another November 1997 survey showed that about 12.6 million persons aged 15 to 30 watch television daily. Over half of them are regular moviegoers.

Instead of exercising censorship, Siguion-Reyna prefers the strict classification of films for public viewing so that young people may be legitimately protected.

But the Board has only eight agents to monitor the implementation of film and

television guidelines throughout the country, with its 1,200 theaters and 800 cable TV providers aside from 13 free TV stations in Manila alone.

In October 1998, Siguion-Reyna and Madamba created the Bantay Tele-Cinema Youth Network, which mobilizes youth leaders to monitor and report violations to the MTRCB. Earlier, monitoring had been the task of Local Regulatory Councils, which turned out to be controlled by theater owners and cable TV operators. Naturally, hardly any violations were reported.

Theaters are now required to display the film's exhibition permit prominently at the ticket booth. Failure to do so resulted in the temporary closure of four cinema houses in Manila—owned by two big producers—signaling that the MTRCB means business. Patrons may be required to present identification cards to be admitted to certain movies. Classifications such as PG-13 (parental guidance for children 13 or below) are meant to make the parents responsible for the viewing habits of their offspring.

The shift is evident: producers now voluntarily tone down some scenes when they want to reach a broader audience, Siguion-Reyna noted. She explained that the details of censorship guidelines, such as allowing one breast but not two to be exposed, may actually give producers more ways to make movies that will bring them big profits.

Doing away with censorship also allows movies to be shown that may not be for general appreciation, but are useful for some groups. Marasigan cited *Realm of the Senses*, which shows direct sexual penetration:

“Yet psychology students or experimental film-makers may learn from it.”

Siguion-Reyna herself has produced movies with sexually explicit scenes, which she defends on the ground that they were integral to the theme. This refrain was taken up by many other film-makers too.

But Siguion-Reyna reassures that, despite allowing the exercise of broad artistic freedom in movie making, the Board has stamped an “X” rating on some films that show gratuitous sex and/or violence, meaning that they are not for public exhibition.

Cable television, because it is relatively new in the Philippines, presents a gray area. Nevertheless, all television shows are governed by the rules of the MTRCB. While local operators could take advantage of the remoteness of their area, reported violations of the Board's guidelines could get them into trouble.

In time, the free tickets the youngsters get as members of the Bantay Tele-Cinema should help them to develop the ability to understand the language of cinema and the relation between media and society, responsibility and freedom.

Source: Women's Feature Service, 24 March 1999