

January 29, 2001

Read no evil, watch no evil

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Perhaps you've seen *Quills* recently, one of two fictionalized stories of the Marquis de Sade on movie screens. In Philip Kaufman's version, the Marquis, artfully portrayed by Geoffrey Rush, is tortured and ultimately put to death for writing books that are tame by today's standards. His crime: corrupting the innocent. His judge: Napoleon Bonaparte. The film is filled with arguments about artistic merit versus moral purity—the sort of debate some of us have wanted to believe we moved beyond years ago.

As recent events remind, we haven't. In its most obvious form, censorship in the same form exists today in Canada. Last month, the Vancouver gay and lesbian bookseller the Little Sister Book and Art Emporium won a 15-year legal battle with the government over customs agents' habit of seizing the store's book shipments at the border. Despite the victory—or maybe because of it—the Canadian Civil Liberties Association chastised the courts for not going far enough in clearing up the fuzzy standard for obscenity.

The case is a reminder that in many ways, Canada remains stuck in an 18th-century, Quill-like mentality when it comes to censoring opinion. No, we don't execute artists, but authorities still censor material they feel might damage the moral fibre of our nation—as if that could actually happen, or, more absurdly, as if their actions could really prevent that. Books about anal sex aren't the cause of deteriorating schools, road rage or homelessness.

Censorship is a powerful weapon most often applied when the subject in question disagrees with the ruling class. Dictators, religious groups, politicians and businesses censor art and writing that questions their authority, beliefs, taste and goals. Consider the Iranian-sponsored fatwa against Salman Rushdie for his book *The Satanic Verses*. Or Canadian painter Eli Langer's mid-'90s court battle after being charged under the child-pornography section of the Criminal Code. Just last fall, some Canadian politicians mused aloud about preventing the rapper Eminem from entering the country to perform, on the grounds that his violent lyrics contravene hate-crime legislation. The Little Sister bookstore case is more clear-cut: the books they imported were deemed pornographic. But it, in turn, was judged by cultural norms regarding homosexuality that have shifted dramatically over the past 15 years.

Questions inevitably arise when censors act. What qualifications do customs agents possess to decide what you should be allowed to read? Have agents been asked philosophical questions about the role of art in society? Or, as in the Little Sisters controversy, about their attitudes towards alternative lifestyles? Is that information on the public record, so we might look it over?

When it comes to art, let adults make adult decisions. Take the French film *Baise-Moi*, frequently described as *Thelma and Louise* on a killing spree with real sex thrown in. Recently banned by the Ontario Film Review Board, the film passed muster in British Columbia and was running in Quebec until someone stole a reel from a Montreal theatre in protest. It was also shown at the Toronto International Film Festival. Still, other than complaints from a few movie critics, professors and legal types, the ban hasn't raised much outcry. In fact, *Baise-Moi* is a brutal, violent film that is also difficult to sit through for other reasons: the plot is thin, the characters are one-dimensional and the message of oppressive

sexual relationships is all but lost after the first 15 minutes. Still, let the film run. The OFRB should slap on a warning and then let the viewer decide—so long as they're adults. On the other hand, let's do more to prevent children from accessing such films. Rental outlets and movie theatres can start by hiring staff who are, themselves, more than 14 years old.

But in the end, art has a way of slipping between the fingers of the most rigid authorities. Ideas, after all, can't be stopped. Look at what trying to do so did to Napoleon.

Source: Derek Chezzi, *Maclean's* (January 29, 2001). Reprinted by permission of the publisher.