

CENSORSHIP AT THE EDGES OF TV: 'VISIONS'

BY JOHN ELLIS

Censorship in British television is normally avoided by the twin procedures of self-censorship and referral to senior management. Occasionally, this system malfunctions, as it did with the programme *Brazil: Cinema, Sex and the Generals*, directed by Simon Hartog for the *Visions* series which I co-produce with him¹. This programme, itself concerned with censorship, was referred to senior management at Channel 4, mentioned by them in discussions with the regulatory body, the Independent Broadcasting Authority, and deemed suitable for transmission by Channel 4 after some minor changes which we agreed with them. The IBA was not party to the detailed discussions, and did not ask to see the programme in advance. However, on the day of transmission it refused to transmit the programme (June 19, 1985).

Lengthy negotiations over the summer followed the rather muted press outcry. Changes were discussed by Channel 4's controller Paul Bonner and the IBA's Claire Mulholland. As director and producer of the programme, Simon Hartog was not party to those negotiations, but was kept informed by Channel 4. When an agreed version seemed to have emerged, this was re-edited with Paul Bonner present for part of the process. However, the IBA decided on seeing this version that it was not suitable for transmission, so the programme was then withdrawn, meaning that it will probably never be transmitted in Britain.

As an outline of the process, this probably suffices. All parties now recognise that the procedures of consultation between Channel 4 and the IBA broke down in this case, through a series of minor bureaucratic fumbles and a

protracted series of misunderstood conversations. For it is remarkable that the negotiations between Paul Bonner and Claire Mulholland took place entirely without reference to a cassette of the programme. Phone conversations and letters both refer to material in the programme by verbal description only. The obvious procedure of reference to time-codes (which can specify to the frame a particular image, and can be displayed as part of a VHS cassette image) does not seem to be an aspect of normal practice in this case. No wonder misunderstandings abounded.

Despite never being broadcast, this has become the most widely discussed of the 32 *Visions* programmes that we have produced. Cassettes were shown to the press as part of the campaign we conducted to question the IBA's decision (a campaign conducted by Large Door Ltd alone, without Channel 4 support). Independent cinemas in various parts of the country have also shown and discussed it; as did audiences at the Venice, Rio de Janeiro and Amiens festivals to which it was invited. Extensive press coverage was also generated when it was shown as part of the *Rue du Cinéma* series on Canal Plus in France.

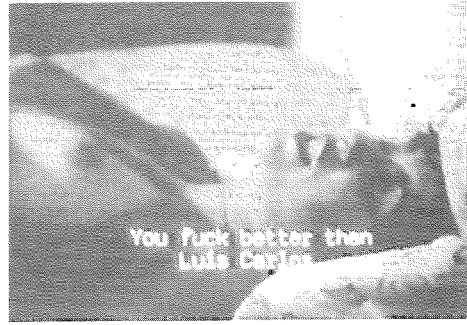
The programme has met with a mixed response, though a universal reaction has been disbelief at the IBA's decision to ban the programme. Responses have centred upon the programme's strategy in detailing its central thesis. It spends half its 40 minute length in detailing two aspects of Brazilian society: the centrality of sexuality as a means of self-expression, no doubt a result of the rigid repression of political discourse under the fifteen year military dictatorship. For film-making, this meant that much of the energy and

¹ See John Ellis, 'Channel 4 - Working Notes', *Screen* November/December 1983, vol 24 no 6, pp 37-51.

inventiveness of *cinema novo* had to be channelled away from overt political statements since the generals' censorship specifically forbade any such speech (even, ironically, material broadly in sympathy with the aims of the regime). So several film-makers discovered the genre of *pornochanchada* (akin to *Carry On* films in a Brazilian idiom), and began to exploit their rather nihilistic and sex-obsessed conventions as a vehicle for political statements. Since this period, hard-core pornography has invaded Brazilian cinemas, and the genre has died. But several film-makers have used their experience to fashion distinctive styles of their own. The programme concentrated on three: Ana Carolina, Carlos Reichenbach and, most enigmatic of all, Carlos Alberto Prates Correia.

At the same time as the original transmission date, the National Film Theatre showed some of their films in a season devoted to Brazilian cinema since 1970, and *Framework* magazine published a special issue devoted to the same theme². The screenings at the NFT crystallised for many people their ambivalence about the films and film-making strategy outlined in the *Visions* programme. Some people – especially feminist critics – maintained that the films were merely genre work within the soft-core cinema, and did not offer any discernable critique of Brazilian society. The same criticism was levelled at the *Visions* programme itself, with some critics claiming that the film clips shown in illustration of the programme's thesis did not prove what they were intended to prove. (This criticism was voiced within a context that nevertheless deplored the IBA's intervention in the programme.) The debate found a forum in the seminar arranged by the NFT, in which the programme (by that time banned) was shown, and film-makers including Ana Carolina were on the platform.

In this debate, a vast difference in cultural understanding became evident. The Brazilians could not understand the British objections to the films – or to the programme, since it adopted a similar stance. Brazilian criticism, still in the grip of libertarian ideologies of sexuality, tends to make a sharp differentiation between 'the erotic' and 'the pornographic'. And as Brazilian film-making in general does not share



Above, a scene from *Love Word Prostitute* (directed by Carlos Reichenbach, 1981) included in *Brazil: Cinema, Sex and the Generals*.

² *Framework* 28, 'Special Issue: Brazil – Post Cinema Novo', 1985.

Hollywood's obsession with male violence, the Brazilian conception of 'the pornographic' tends to be used to describe representations of sexuality which foreground male violence towards women. As a result, portrayals of sexual activity that seem to imply an 'equality' between male and female parties (in the case of heterosexual activity), or gentleness between men, are seen as 'erotic', and therefore as socially acceptable. A critique of voyeurism, of the aggression of the look and the subordination of its object, does not seem to exist. Yet this critique is central to a prominent feminist/left analysis of pornography in the UK which rejects any distinction between 'the pornographic' and 'the erotic'. This misunderstanding was compounded by the fact that Brazilian society seems to have developed and centralised certain discourses (and practices) around sexuality as a compensation for the repression of political discourses. Perhaps this return of the repressed can also be glimpsed in the level of development of clinical psychoanalytic practice in Brazil, which far outstrips Europe's.

However, I'm not sure how successful our programme was in presenting these problems. With hindsight, I'm convinced that it takes Brazilian arguments as its own to a greater degree than perhaps a programme for a British audience really should. Instead of meeting possible objections, instead of raising arguments about voyeurism, it is content to give voice to the very eloquent proponents of the Brazilian debate, providing only a general context in which the prevalence of discourses of sexuality have in Brazil. This strategy of giving voice to people who have been excluded from British TV is one that *Visions* has been keen to follow in its programmes on non-European cinemas. And the validity of the strategy was endorsed by one of the Brazilian film-makers at the NFT debate whose impatience with criticisms from British members of the audience led to an outburst in which he accused them of having a colonial mentality, of dictating to the Third World. - However, in this case, the programme's strategy clearly did not allow the arguments from Brazil to be heard as well as they could be—even though the tactic of not over-contextualising other cultures has worked in *Visions* programmes before. The degree to which British counter-arguments have to be anticipated clearly depend on the level of difficulty that certain topics

present to our culture.

The IBA's intervention did nothing to clarify the situation, since its objections to the programme were nowhere based on a critique of voyeurism. They came from the right, from the definitions provided by the moral vigilantes of the Mary Whitehouse camp. Working under the guidelines which mention (but nowhere define) 'taste and decency', certain extracts from films were deemed unsuitable for British TV audiences, even late at night on Channel 4. When pressed by Alexander Walker³ on Channel 4's *Right to Reply* programme (June 28, 1985), the IBA's Claire Mulholland was forced to justify her actions by referring to the hypothetical viewer who tuned in casually, was not involved in the argument of the programme, but who might become 'excited' by the film clips being shown. At the same time that the *Visions* programme should have been shown, the other channel that the IBA regulates, ITV, was showing an American 'entertainment' film whose basic premise was that a sexually active woman should be punished by acts of male violence against her: a frequent theme which does not attract the IBA's censorious attention.

Behind the IBA's objection to *Visions*' film extracts lies the conception that the extracts would have been unobjectionable had they been shown within their original narrative context. The fact of their being used in quotation was objectionable in its eyes. This odd judgment goes against most understanding of the mechanics of the soft-core genre, in which it is mainly the narrative promise of sexual activity rather than its actual depiction which excites the viewer. I had assumed that the critical context within which the clips were placed would be adequate to shift attention from voyeurism to analysis. However, since the IBA officers probably saved time by using its fast-forward buttons, they may have missed this feature of the programme.

However, the final sticking point was not its desire that some sequences should be excised from the programme, since Simon Hartog took the view that it would be better to have the programme shown in a mutilated form rather than not at all. Rather, the unacceptable aspect of the IBA's attitude lay in its refusal to allow the programme to indicate where cuts had been made. The IBA would allow an announcement at

³ Film critic of the London *Standard*—a right-wing libertarian and active anti-censorship campaigner.

the start of the programme to indicate that a cut version was being screened, but it refused to allow either a verbal mention of the cuts, or a caption indicating that cuts had been made, at the points where this had happened. So much for the casual viewer just tuning in haphazardly, in whose name the censorship was carried out in the first place. The IBA even refused a form of commentary that spoke in general about 'cuts having to be made', which did not mention who made them. Its only justification for this attitude was that it would be 'confusing for the viewers'. In a programme concerned with censorship?

The whole affair has shown that the IBA's current conception of its role as regulator of television is clearly inadequate. The Authority has expended large amounts of energy on censoring a programme at the fringes of broadcasting, a programme, as officers have admitted informally, that would not have created any controversy had it been broadcast when first intended. And at the same time, no action is taken on much more mainstream, generic and repeated representations which cause considerable concern to many people. The representation of male violence and macho

behaviour is one example, the repetition of demeaning and patronising jokes about women and racial minorities is another. Yet the IBA does not conceive its role as one of regulating the general run of television; it merely tinkers with those exceptional cases that float to its attention. In these exceptional cases, as with the *Visions* programme, the subjective views of individuals within the organisation can hide behind the vague general formulations of the *Television Programme Guidelines*. Such subjectivism and imprecision would not be tolerable were the IBA to regulate the general run of programmes. A public debate would be necessary, taking the form of a continuous consultation on a wide variety of issues, the publishing of details of particular interventions, and the raising of issues of concern from pressure groups in society. It would need, in other words, a democratic form of regulation rather than the present secretive and unaccountable system. As we were not allowed to say in the programme: 'Censorship in the generals' Brazil was even more arbitrary and Kafka-esque than it is in Britain. . . . And since the downfall of the generals, the censorship of film and theatre has been abolished in Brazil.'

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Regional Conference and SGM

To continue the work begun through Initiatives, the Bradford Conference and our network of regional groups, a conference on the state of media education in the UK.

Convened jointly with the Department of Education and Science to discuss policy on the place of the media in education and to plan strategies for future development.

The Special General Meeting of the Society for Education in Film and Television will take place at the same time, to vote on a motion to broaden the Society's membership to teachers subscribing to Initiatives, the newsletter for media education.

JUNE 7th 1986 UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

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