

Herald Forum

Censorship row flares anew over controversial Caligula

The case for censorship:

The case against censorship:

By T.E. Flanagan

(Flanagan is a professor in the University of Calgary's political science department.)

The recent seizure of the film Caligula in Edmonton and Calgary presents an occasion to think about the rationale of censorship.

I don't want to address the secondary questions of whether this particular film is obscene, or whether it is wise to continue the peculiar Canadian system of dividing responsibility between provincial censorship boards and prosecutions for obscenity under the federal criminal code.

I want to discuss the fundamental question of whether government at any level should prevent adults from seeing whatever films or other performances they choose.

Numerous people, especially writers, journalists, and film makers, as well as many ordinary citizens, have recently made public statements that it is an affront to a free society for government to exercise this power.

Let me explain why I disagree. At the outset, I forego any appeal to religious justification.

Canada is a pluralistic society of Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Sikhs, and other religions, as well as many people without religious belief or affiliation.

No appeal to divine authority can be convincing under such conditions.

Nor do I appeal to alleged findings of sociologists that seeing movies like Caligula might impel the viewers to immediate criminal acts of rape or assault.

Human beings do not respond in such mechanical fashion to the scenes they witness.

My argument rests upon broader considerations.

Film a 'public activity'

Any society, and especially a society which enjoys a high degree of individual freedom, can exist only if the individuals who compose it are largely capable of keeping their conduct within the bounds of law.

The less people are able to control themselves, the more they will need to be regimented by the state.

Self-control requires a moral code which is learned in childhood in the family and reinforced in institutions such as church, school, Boy Scouts, Girl Guides, or athletic teams.

Further support for society's moral code comes from what might be called "public morality", or "public decency."

Even though human frailty means the code will often be violated, it is important that people support its precepts in public and feel shame if others observe them violating it.

This is not hypocrisy; it is recognition that we are social beings whose conduct is affected powerfully by what we perceive as public opinion.

A film or theatrical performance is not mere private vice; it is a public activity.

People go with their friends to public buildings to attend such performances in large groups.

What is the effect on standards of public decency when people sit together to be entertained by a movie which graphically portrays many of mankind's most detestable crimes — torture, mutilation, murder, rape, and necrophilia — not as an artistic exploration of the human soul but as a commercialized way of passing time?

Even if no one in the audience ever commits a similar action, viewing these spectacles for amusement dulls the sense of horrified outrage which is one of society's defences against such crimes.

When such movies are openly advertised, viewed, and reviewed, public decency is undermined.

At the same time, damage is done to the efforts of parents and other adults who are trying to teach children the basic virtues of compassion, sexual fidelity, and respect for other persons.

This is not a plea for prudish censorship of the arts.

Sex and violence are part of life, and are legitimate subjects for artistic treatment.

And grade B porno movies without artistic merit do only limited damage to public decency because they do not become media events; they are attended by a restricted clientele in theatres which cater to that taste.

They can be tolerated in the way that a free society tolerates other unedifying spectacles like prostitution or drunkenness.

But public decency is directly challenged when an expensive, highly-advertised film featuring international stars portrays foul and shocking actions in a spirit of commercial exploitation.

At this point, governmental prosecution is a legitimate act of social self-defence.

By Aaron James Rynd

(Rynd is a Calgary lawyer.)

The seizure of the film Caligula by the attorney-general's office must be deplored by every thinking person in this province.

Not because we enjoy violence or sex on the screen, but because the government should not dictate what we can see.

The attorney-general's office is staffed by civil servants.

We all have experienced the degree of incompetence, rudeness, and lack of common sense which government bureaucracy fosters.

Similarly, you will have to travel a long distance to find anyone who has praised any Alberta politician for his wisdom.

Yet these bureaucrats and politicians pretend to know what is good for our minds and morals.

I suspect that they don't know what is good for themselves, us, or anyone.

If this were an isolated episode, we could

laugh at the attorney-general's bungling and turn to other issues.

Calgary saw Caligula for a week or two longer than Edmonton, because the government forgot that Calgary exists. The government often behaves as though Edmonton were the entire world.

But the narrower issue is that Calgary wasn't corrupted by the extra exposure, and wouldn't be if Caligula showed here for a year.

Films do not corrupt. They are chosen by the audience, and not forced upon it.

I chose to see Deerhunter and Raiders of the Lost Ark. Both films contain violence. I was not forced to see these films, and I am not forced to see Caligula.

The attorney-general conveniently forgets that football is violent. We are not forced to watch football, but neither are players arrested or games interrupted by officious zealots.

There is cultural snobbery in this country. Sports are sacrosanct. Violence on the field is acceptable; violence on the screen is not.

The same contrast separates books from films. For better or worse, sex on the printed page is utterly explicit. But you must not perform the same acts or utter the same words on screen, lest the attorney-general condemn you.

We can tell the real world from fantasy in films. We know that sex and violence on the screen are exaggerated far beyond their place in real life.

Film-makers believe that most of us want a thrill in our entertainment, and they are right. But we always notice where the theatre stops and real life starts.

The people who try to fly like Superman after seeing the movie have a serious problem. The problem wasn't caused by the movie. People have thrown themselves off rooftops in imitation flight for hundreds, indeed thousands of years.

And people have gone berserk without explanation for the same period of time.

The wrong approach

Better cure the problem, improve the economy, remove the causes of war than censor films.

Politicians are quick to raise their salaries, but slow to tackle serious problems.

It is easier to censor films than to lower our mortgage payments. And, so they monkey around with Caligula instead of ensuring that our drinking water from the reservoir is safe, or that we can afford a roof over our heads.

Caligula is not important. We shall survive perfectly well without it.

But the suspicion abounds that the government refuses to let us see this film for the same reasons as it refuses us information about the Heritage Fund or orders boards of health to stop showing a birth control film.

The government thinks that public support for a policy is measured in decibels: by the loudness of lobby groups.

It anticipates criticism of its Heritage investments, so it keeps its mechanics and policies under Conservative control and secrecy, instead of in full public view. A minister hears a protest from a pro-life lobby, so he censors an educational film.

The government is wrong in this approach. Extremist groups by their nature speak with loud voices.

They shout, and appear stronger than their real numbers warrant.

Governments respond to their demands, and later learn that the true trend in public opinion is quite different.

This is true on issues as diverse as foreign policy, abortion, and censorship. Noise and wisdom don't go hand in hand.

We would be a lot better off if governments let us make our own decisions about films, gave us more information about our own funds, and interfered a lot less in our lives.

