

The New Film Censorship Regulations

Gordon Mirams

Censor of Films, Department of Internal Affairs

THE NEW Film Censorship Regulations which were gazetted last June and which came fully into operation in December are of interest to the public generally, but they should be of very particular interest to teachers, parents, and all others who have any influence over film-going by children. Indeed, it is not too much to say that unless this interest is actively shown, New Zealand's present system of film censorship could conceivably collapse. For the basis of the system is that primary responsibility for deciding what films should be seen by children is assumed, not by the Government, but by parents and teachers.

Very considerable changes have taken place in the approach to film censorship in the past thirty years, not only in New Zealand (where they have, however, occurred in perhaps their most complete form) but also in many other countries throughout the world. And yet, although they have become a part of daily life, these changes are still far from being recognised as having taken place. To appreciate this, it is perhaps sufficient to look at the present definition of 'Censor' in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*: 'official [responsible for] licensing, or suppressing as immoral, seditious, or inopportune, books, plays, news, or military intelligence (vb. to exercise such control over, make excisions or changes in)'.

This definition does not even recognize the existence of the newer media of film, radio, and television: it is a solely 'literary' concept. It certainly does not bear a great deal of relevance to what a *film* censor actually does; or, more correctly, it omits a vital part of his work.

For while it is true that the new concept, or guiding principle, of film censorship does, of course, still retain the literary censor's traditional function of partial elimination or total banning of material, this suppressive function has now in reality been largely superseded, in New Zealand anyway, by a new function of 'guidance' which is not found at all in older concepts of censorship. Suppression, in whole or in part, which once constituted the sole work of censorship, has for the cinema in New Zealand been relegated to a comparatively minor place, the emphasis being very much more on the classification of films according to the type of audience for which they are considered suitable. It is left for the most part to individual filmgoers (particularly parents) to decide for themselves whether they wish to follow this advice or not. This change has come about through the legislative provision of a wide range of 'recommendatory' certificates.

On the supposition that his advice will be widely and correctly advertised, the Censor is enabled to approve, unemasculated, a great number of films which he would otherwise feel bound to cut heavily, or even ban outright. In the majority of cases the responsibility of choice is placed squarely on the consumers themselves. If the fact must be accepted – and every country seems to have been forced to accept it, however

reluctantly – that some measure of censorship control over the cinema is at present inevitable, then it may be conceded that in New Zealand we have gone as far as is possible towards giving democratic expression to what is inherently an authoritarian process. But, to reiterate, a flexible and liberal censorship system, involving a minimum restriction of the rights of picturegoers as a whole, can be brought about only by placing a heavy responsibility on parents, teachers, and all those who have any control over children.

Thus in the new Regulations will be found five types of certificate, only one of which is mandatorily restrictive. This is the (R) certificate, about which I shall have more to say later.

THE (G) CERTIFICATE

The new (G) certificate is the old ‘U’ (or so called ‘universal’), approving a film for general exhibition without qualification. Virtually all short films get this classification and – if past standards can be maintained – between 60 per cent and 65 per cent of all features. A (G) certificate does not mean that the film is especially suitable for children or that they will find it particularly entertaining, though this may happen quite often. What it does mean is that, in the Censor’s opinion, the film contains nothing which makes it unsuitable for the average, normal child.

Films with (Y), (A), and (S) classifications are also approved for general exhibition – so that nobody, however young, is compelled to be excluded – but they carry their own particular recommendations.

THE (Y) CERTIFICATE

The (Y) certificate is an innovation, not only for New Zealand but for film censorship generally. Under it, a film is approved for general exhibition with the recommendation that it is suitable for persons aged 13 and over. Whereas ‘adults’ have been, and still are defined as persons of or over the age of 16, the Regulations now for the first time contain a definition of ‘children’ – as persons under the age of 13 years. Admittedly, all such classifications based on age tend to be arbitrary – whether they fix how old a person must be to vote, marry, drink in a bar, or undergo military service – but in the present case, 13 was chosen because it is the age at which the majority of New Zealand children make the change between primary and post-primary schools. It may be said that the new (Y) certificate has recognized, for censorship purposes, the existence of the adolescent picturegoer; the group between children and adults.

Thus this certificate covers films suitable for ‘young people’ as well as for ‘adults’. Already there are signs that it is filling a real need, for experience shows that there are a great many films which are not really ‘tough’ enough for the full (A) recommendation and yet which do not qualify for the (G) clearance either, but which fit perfectly into the (Y) category. Take for example the recent screen versions of *Othello* and *Richard III*. Both of these, though Shakespearean and therefore carrying an odour of educational sanctity, are not exactly suitable fare for young children. At the same time, censors might hesitate to brand such films with an (A) certificate, suitable for adults only, especially as both plays are possibly being studied in post-

primary schools. The (Y) certificate resolves this censorship dilemma in a commonsense way, by providing the ideal half-way house. Nobody, however young, is debarred from seeing a film with this certificate, since it is approved for general exhibition; but it goes out with the recommendation that it is suitable for persons aged 13 and over. There is not likely to be much quarrel with that.

THE (A) CERTIFICATE

What has been said about the (Y) certificate indicates the basis on which the (A) certificate also is given to a film, approving it for general exhibition but with the recommendation that it is suitable for adults only. (As mentioned, adults are defined as persons of or over the age of 16 years.) A film with an (A) certificate is one which the Censor feels does not justify being put in the 'restricted' category, although it is clearly less suited for juvenile consumption than a film of the (Y) class. This may be because of the maturity of its theme or its general treatment, or perhaps merely because of one or two key incidents which could not be deleted without detracting from the film's entertainment and dramatic value for grown-ups. Therefore the Censor again leaves the onus of decision resting on the parent, or on the individual youngster, while making it plain that there should be at least second thoughts before anyone under the age of 16 is taken to see the film. Obviously the Censor can not lay down the law for every individual boy and girl. Only a parent, or perhaps a teacher, can know whether any particular child is at the proper level of understanding and experience to take certain incidents or themes in his stride, and accordingly whether any harm is likely to be done by disregarding the censorship recommendation on that occasion. At the same time, an (A) certificate serves as some indication to grown-up filmgoers themselves of the type of entertainment being offered them; that it is, so to speak, not child's play.

THE (S) CERTIFICATE

It will be noted that wherever possible the wording of the various certificates puts emphasis on the suitability of the film concerned for its particular kind of audience, and not on its unsuitability. This is especially the case with the (S) certificate, which also represents a complete innovation in censorship practice.

This certificate gives the Censor wide latitude to deal with any exceptional film that does not fit into the two routine recommendatory categories of (Y) and (A) for instance, a film with semi-horrific theme or a few important sequences which are gruesome or unusually tense. Excisions may be impracticable, so that the commonsense treatment for such a film would be to approve it for general exhibition with (for example) the special recommendation that parts may be disturbing to young children and nervous women. A case in point was the Korean war story, *Prisoner-of-War*.

However, the most general and most useful application of the (S) certificate is likely to be when it is used in a wholly positive way to enable theatre-managers, if they so desire, to advertise certain films as 'particularly suitable for family audiences' or 'particularly suitable as children's entertainment'. This special recommendation can be awarded by the Censor not only to films such as those of the Children's Entertainment Film Foundation which are made with audiences of young children

specifically in mind, but also to those films in the ordinary (G) certificate class which, while not originally designed primarily for children, are nevertheless particularly entertaining to them, besides, of course, being wholly 'suitable'.

THE (R) CERTIFICATE

Although censorship cuts may be made in films of all classes, in practice they are most often required in films which already come close to (G) certificate standards. That is to say, in most such cases there is nothing in the actual themes of the films to disqualify them from (G) classification; on the other hand, without a toning-down of their treatment by excisions – which may occasionally have to be fairly drastic – they would probably have to be graded either as (Y) or (A). If nothing dramatically important is lost, it is often desirable on several counts to cut these films down to (G) level.

There is, of course, material of a certain type which, whatever the certificate finally awarded, cannot escape deletion, perhaps because it is wilfully brutal or plainly indecent; but it can be said that, in general practice, there is most likelihood of no excisions at all being made when a film is given an (R) certificate. Indeed, one of the main purposes of this certificate is to avoid or reduce the need for cutting: together with the fact that the whole theme of the screenplay and its approach to its subject matter will be so mature and realistic that the film becomes one which, in the Censor's view, only audiences over a specified age, or of a specified class, can be permitted to see.

And in such a case, subject only to possible review by the Appeal Board, it is the Censor's view alone that holds good. For, unlike all other classes of film, those with (R) certificates are *not* approved for general exhibition, and even parents are not given a right of choice about adhering to the Censor's ruling. On the contrary, these films are approved subject to the strict condition that the screening of them will be definitely restricted to persons over a specified age, or to a specified class of audience.

While the (R) classification is capable of being applied not only to varying age-groups but also, if necessary, to segregated audiences or specialized groups (e.g. film society members, medical students) as a general rule the (R) certificate is used for the definite exclusion from certain films of two age-groups only (persons under 13, or persons under 16). These age-groups correspond to those covered by the (Y) and (A) certificates, with the essential difference already mentioned, that whereas the latter are purely recommendatory certificates, the (R) classification is mandatory in effect, and the exclusion of under-age persons is obligatory. The screenplays concerned are of different types: e.g. so-called 'horror' films; productions with wholly adult themes and treatment often, but not necessarily, from Continental studios; screenplays which involve young children as characters, placing them in situations of jeopardy and great suspense.

The new Regulations are designed to ensure that this restrictive classification shall be taken much more seriously than in the past. Theatre-managers are still obliged to take all steps reasonably necessary to exclude under-age persons; but in addition it now becomes an offence for an under-age child knowingly to get into, or to try to get into,

a theatre showing an (R) certificate programme, or for anyone (even a parent) to help him to do so. A fine of £50 can be imposed for a breach of this kind.

It is essential that these facts should be clearly understood by all parents and by all children – perhaps particularly by the latter. Teachers if they were willing to help could do much to ensure this understanding of the facts. How the problem should be tackled is, of course, a matter for each teacher to decide; but there is no doubt that teachers could play an important role in drawing the attention of their pupils to the fact that the (R) classification on films is meant to be taken very seriously, and that the words ‘persons under 16 (or 13) will not be admitted’ mean exactly what they say. Children should be warned that, if under the specified age, they will be definitely breaking the law should they try to gain admission to an (R) programme. The gravity with which the Legislature views such offences is reflected in the penalty prescribed in the Regulations, which fix a maximum fine of £50.

If only because it places serious obligations on all concerned, the (R) certificate is never lightly given by the Censor. In fact, only about 5 per cent of all features shown in New Zealand get this classification. At the same time, in the whole range of certificates there is none more valuable; none which contributes more towards keeping our censorship system flexible, liberal, and in line with intelligent modern trends. In the nature of things, many of the most controversial and most dramatically unusual films released are in the (R) category; and they tend also to be frequently revived. While it is important therefore that children should be protected from their impact it is perhaps equally as important, from the viewpoint of adult picture-goers and of serious film-makers, that the films themselves should not have to be banned, or censored down to juvenile level. Thus, at the same time as it safeguards children, our censorship system goes as far as it can towards safeguarding the rights of adult picturegoers, who constitute the majority of the picture-going public.

It has been mentioned that between 60 and 65 per cent of all features now receive (G) certificates in New Zealand, and about 5 per cent receive (R). Of the remainder some 22 per cent are likely to be classified (Y); some 10 per cent (A); with about 2 per cent receiving the (S) recommendation. This is, of course, only an approximation, and the figures may vary each year according to what sort of films are made and imported.

CENSORSHIP CLASSIFICATIONS

- (G) APPROVED FOR GENERAL EXHIBITION
- (Y) RECOMMENDED AS SUITABLE FOR PERSONS AGED 13 AND OVER
- (A) RECOMMENDED AS SUITABLE FOR ADULTS ONLY (persons aged 16 and over)
- (R) SCREENING RESTRICTED TO PERSONS OVER A SPECIFIED AGE OR TO A SPECIFIED AUDIENCE
- (S) RECOMMENDED AS SUITABLE OR UNSUITABLE FOR A SPECIFIED CLASS OF AUDIENCE

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