

CINECENSURA

FILMS “PROHIBITED TO MINORS”: FROM PEOPLE’S PETITIONS AND CENSORSHIP COMMISSIONS

by *Franco Grattarola*

The phenomenon of petitions from the people against cinema “prohibited to minors” (a boiling cauldron in which, judging by those presenting them and those signing them, includes indiscriminately violent, erotic, pornographic, political and auteur films) was born in Italy, in a prevalently Catholic society at the end of the 1960s. The Catholic world armed itself with historical associations and movements created ad hoc, mainly to substitute the decreasingly incisive action of the censors, magistrates and politicians. The censor’s net began to loosen and the hordes of moralisers grew in numbers.

The era of Pietro Trombi, Milan’s Chief Public Prosecutor, accustomed to banning (often followed by the suppression or editing of numerous scenes) “scandalous” auteur films such as *Rocco e i suoi fratelli* (Rocco and His Brothers, 1960), *Dolci inganni* (Sweet Deceptions, 1960), *L’avventura* (1960), *Il passaggio del Reno* (Tomorrow Is My Turn, 1960) *La giornata balorda* (From a Roman Balcony, 1960) and *Viridiana* (1961), was by then a distant memory¹.

The law on censorship, passed in 1962 at the dawn of the epochal centre-left government alliance, passed the power to ban a film into the hands of the city prosecutor where the first public screening of the film took place. While not lessening the fury of “serial” banners like Francesco Novello (prosecutor of Lodi)², Vincenzo Salmeri (magistrate of Palermo)³ and Donato Massimo Bartolomei (chief prosecutor of Catanzaro and then, until retirement, chief prosecutor of Aquila)⁴, the new norm had the immediate effect of diminishing the invasive intervention of the judiciary.

The censorship commissions, however, bestowed authorisation more easily compared to the past; films, for example, like *The Pawnbroker* (1964) by Sidney Lumet, *Blow-up* (1966) by Michelangelo Antonioni and *Belle de jour* (1967) by Luis Buñuel (all of which passed through the censor’s hands in 1967), all contain scenes of nudity and risqué situations. This growing liberalism by the censorship commissions towards mainstream and auteur cinema was taken advantage of by production companies and distributors specialized in the film trends of the time. In 1967-68, they released onto the market in increasingly large doses, films which could be considered to be part of the embryonic erotic genre. The impetuous development of the unorthodox genre did not pass unnoticed: “The most salient fact of the last phase of the latest film season,” declared a worried editorialist, “was represented by a genuine invasion of films exclusively and obsessively revolving around the subject of sex. We are facing a very real escalation of eroticism in films, seen in an increasing number of films, in which the genuine pornographic aim is disguised under the label of various alibis: like sexual education, sociological investigation, period satire or even protest cinema. [...] This current trend in cinema worries anyone who has the film public truly at heart. Obviously, we are on the brink of an escalation in eroticism that could have the most unthinkable consequences. If we remember that, only fifteen or twenty years ago, the censors stiffened when faced with films such as *Il diavolo in corpo* (Devil in the Flesh, 1947) *La ronde* (1950), it is hard to imagine what the future could hold in the same number of years.”⁵ The hard figures, in any case, speak far louder than the complaints of those nostalgic about the censors of yesteryear. “In the 1967-68 film season,” states a film magazine, “of 593 new releases, 20, equal to 3.4% were of what can be defined an

'erotic-sexual' nature. To be fair, we should immediately point out that the classification also includes both the genre which deals with loving relationships in a physiological manner, in all its variations, deviations, degenerations, as well as the genre such as *Helga*, in which there are traces of populism and even educational values [...]. Now that we've got that out of the way, we can reveal that the following film season, 1968-1969, currently underway, the films belonging to that category of production have tripled; besides homemade Italian ones, they also hail mainly from Germany, Sweden, Japan and France. As of 4 May [1969] there are exactly 59 in circulation, of which 17 Italian, 7 Japanese, 5 Swedish, 13 German, 5 Italian-French co-productions, 1 Italian-French-German co-production, 2 Greek, 2 American and 1 Czech. [...] For the coming 1969-1970 season, the forthcoming films list so far includes 74 films which, from the title or promotional material, we gauge belong to the erotic-sexual genre."⁶

Despite the intentions of the Ministro di Grazia e Giustizia (Minister of Pardons and Justice), Silvio Gava, who at the end of 1969 proposed a new law abolishing censorship commissions, he assigned the task of issuing authorization to the Rome courts for the whole country, established precise norms, also with regards to advertising material presented during screening, safeguarding minors working on sets and entrusted the question of withdrawing films to a single political taskforce, previously over-zealous in demanding cuts and bans. It seemed to escape his notice that a slew of erotic films was invading the film theatres.

The only exception, or almost, was the Catholic Agostino Greggi, a three-times member of parliament, initially for the Christian Democrat (DC) party (1963-1968 and 1968-1972) and then for the Movimento Sociale Italiano – Destra Nazionale (1979-1983), who was impassable in contesting the verdicts, which he found far too permissive, of censorship commissions and magistrates.⁷ The first signs of a slackening of censorship provoked the immediate reaction of the diligent parliamentarian. In January 1967, Greggi presented parliamentary questions condemning censorship commission clearances and about lowering the cut off age to 14 rather than 18 for the romantic comedy *Come imparai ad amare le donne* (How I Learnt To Love Women, 1966) by Luciano Salce.⁸

The undersecretary of Turismo e Spettacolo (Tourism and Entertainment), Adolfo Sarti, replying to Greggi and the DC member of Parliament Giovanni Battista Migliori (who asked the same question), declared that he "shared the worries of members of the House that presented the questions. It does actually seem as if a certain type of cinema, offending not only moral cannons but also good taste and decency, considers Italians to be mentally deficient." The reply of the government representative was unsatisfactory to the intransigent member of Parliament, who blames "the total failure of laws on film revision" and the "rampant exploitation of sex for commercial ends."⁹ Seeing *Il sesso degli angeli* (The Sex of Angels, 1968) by Ugo Liberatore, an erotic LSD-based melodrama, also drove Greggi to write a report to three ministers (of Justice, Entertainment and Home Affairs), underwritten by 45 DC members of the House, in which he asked that the film be immediately withdrawn because it was "an offence to culture and the intelligence of spectators" and supposedly was an apology for numerous crimes (kidnapping, murder, failure to offer assistance, defamation and hiding a corpse, obscene, unnatural acts, use of drugs, suicide).¹⁰ Not even a witty comedy like *Dove vai tutta nuda?* (Where Are You Going All Naked?, 1969) by Pasquale Festa Campanile escapes the wrath of Greggi: he interrogated the relevant Ministry to stigmatise the excess of liberalism of the censors, which allowed the distribution of such a "concentration of sex and idiocy, humiliating for every single spectator with a minimum ability to think rationally and with aesthetic taste." The reply from Franco Evangelisti, the undersecretary of Turismo e Spettacolo was concise but shrewd: on the one side he reassured his fellow party member that a reform of the current unsatisfactory norms for film censorship was being studied, on the other he didn't hold back from pointing out that the revision commission had given authorisation, banning it for under-14s, in

consideration of the fact that the risqué scenes in the film are clearly satirical.¹¹ The decision of the Pisa investigating magistrate to clear *L'assoluto naturale* (He and She, 1969) of all accusations of obscenity was a disappointment to Greggi. Bolognini's film, wrote the magistrate to explain his decision, shows how "the common sense of decency, over the past few years, especially in film productions, has notably changed, in the sense that the average man is willing to accept, without moral reactions, public displays of sexuality which were unthinkable a few years ago.

These changes in customs cannot be judged in court, nor favoured or contrasted, as a judge must merely limit himself to consider what is obliged by law to take into consideration common thinking and not personal opinion." The member of Parliament, in questions to the ministers of Grazia e Giustizia (Pardon and Justice) and of Turismo e dello Spettacolo (Tourism and Entertainment), replied steadfastly that "it is hard to understand how to evaluate the common sense of decency of an entire population towards productions, rarely ever artistic, of minor filmmakers that are often personally abnormal."¹²

Aware of the lack of effectiveness of methods adopted by the magistrates and politicians, the Catholic world understood that the time had come to launch an attack on films "prohibited to minors", making use of various forms of protest, including joining forces with others with the same viewpoint. The general assembly of Italian bishops in a document dated 18 April 1969 invited "all authorities and responsible people to join a pressing appeal to remedy the situation and safeguard the moral health of the population."¹³ This was followed by constant and pressing anti-pornography appeals by cardinals and bishops. The fight against erotic cinema unexpectedly assumed the frenzied tones typical of extreme-left protests.

On 18 May 1969, in Treviso, a march of around 500 youths, armed with controversial hand-made banners bearing the symbols of the Azione Cattolica and DC party, ended with them lying down in front of the entrance of the Garibaldi cinema (the film being screened: *Inghilterra nuda*, Naked England, by Vittorio De Sisti), preventing potential spectators from entering. The self-proclaimed "defenders of morality" from Sambruson (in the municipality of Dolo), were no less ardent: headed by a student and a priest, on 3 June 1969, rather than a sit-in, they set up a procession of around thirty cars, plastered in slogans ("We want to go to the cinema, not the pig-sty"), which, after having passed through various villages along the river in Brenta, stopped in front of the Modernissimo cinema in Dolo. There was a cacophony of honking horns, shouting, insults hurled at spectators, threats against the theatre owner, tearing down the promotional posters of the film being screened (*Brucia ragazzo brucia*, A Woman on Fire, by Fernando di Leo) and the actual theatre being closed. In Padova, on 7 June 1969, a throng of Catholic activists paralysed the city centre, expressing their disgust with "filthy cinema". In Oderzo, in the province of Treviso, on 8 June 1969, sixty youths affiliated with various church organisations assaulted the Cristallo cinema, which was screening *La monaca di Monza* (Lady of Monza, 1969) by Eriprando Visconti, yelling slogans against the film which they held to be an insult to nuns.

These new forms of protest did not, however, exclude a return to usual practices of reporting films to the police or magistrates. The safe-guarders of morality of Azione Cattolica were particularly active in this field, as were magazines like *La Luce* (a weekly publication of the Lombardy archdiocese, in 14 editions), *Il Resegone* from Lecco, *Il Cittadino* from Monza and *Il Popolo cattolico* from Treviglio, which provided their readers with both updated lists of publications and films banned in the country, and forms to fill out to make an official complaint about the film.¹⁴

Included in the arsenal of weapons put into play by the Catholic organisations, there was also the then rather unusual form of petitioning. And so in 1969, the first petition by the people against pornography and violence in films was presented. Spearheaded by the Antoniano monks of Bologna (notorious for organizing a well-known children's singing competition), backed by the elusive "movement for psychological and moral integrity

of youth" and addressed to the Presidents of the Republic, the President of the Council and the Presidents of the Senate and the Lower House, the Constitutional Court and the ministers of Turismo e dello Spettacolo and of Grazia e Giustizia, this petition demanded an intervention to "stop pornography and incitement to commit crimes which are rife in entertainment."¹⁵ Despite the deep commitment of the petitioners, who collected signatures in parishes, shops, houses, markets and in the streets, the most effective form of protest proved to be the less onerous official complaint. Especially if sent to a magistrate who is sympathetic to the arguments hailing from the Catholic world. Throughout the 1970s and beyond, the moralisers mainly targeted auteur cinema, one that was considered to be pernicious due to its great visibility. In this light, the films made by, amongst others, Pier Paolo Pasolini (*Il Decameron*, *The Decameron*, 1971, and *Racconti di Canterbury*, *The Canterbury Tales*, 1972), Elio Petri (*La proprietà non è più un furto*, *Property Is No Longer A Theft*, 1973), Sergio Citti (*Storie scellerate*, *Roguish Stories* 1973) and Ken Russell (*The Devils*, 1971) were systematically the targets of official complaints and reports by associations and individuals, which in many cases lead to as many legal proceedings¹⁶. There were many minor associations active in this phase, but one of the major players was the Mario Fani association. After having been a vigorous backer of the anti-divorce law campaign, they threw their weight behind the battle against X-rated films.

Bar the occasional protest, animated by a small group of traditionalist Catholics on the occasion of the Rome preview of the film *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1973) by Norman Jewison¹⁷, with the passing of the years, the pro-censorship campaigns began to attract less activists. The Catholic world's battles were weakened by the growing trend towards secularization; the most obvious signs were the victory of those fighting not to have the divorce referendum repealed and the passing of the law on abortion. This secularization was especially felt in film, one of the fields most touched by changing tendencies. The erotic genre, despite dominating at the box office, began to show its limitations: spectators, driven by the echo of hard porn from abroad, started to demand more explicit films. Producers and theatre owners understood and began to adapt: in Rome and Milan, in 1978, the first red-light cinemas was opened, and towards the end of the 1978-1979 film season, the first home-grown and foreign hardcore productions began to circulate. And so, amongst the dying groans of the erotic genre and the first roars of the hardcore one, the upholders of morality fight their last major battles. Breathing new life into the moralists front was the Associazione Nazionale per il Buon Costume, which in Bologna on 22 May 1977 organised a convention named *Vertice a Bologna sulla pubblica moralità* along with the local Mario Fani association. This gathering, given ample coverage in the Catholic daily newspaper *L'Osservatore Romano*, summed up the proposals put forward by associations and individuals in nine points. Amongst the usual wishes, the final motion of the convention proposed the modification of article 2 (the composition of the censorship commission) and 14 (the magistrates' authority to withdraw films nationwide) of the law on censorship of 1962, and a new norm which sanctions private TV stations that broadcast X-rated films. The document also protested against the state contributions automatically assigned a percentage of box-office takings (which according to the moralisers, is to the advantage of the erotic film producers). The proposals of the association, delivered to the President, Giulio Andreotti and to the minister of Entertainment, Dario Antonozzi, didn't seem to create much of a stir in the political world.¹⁸

The birth of the hardcore genre finds the censorship commissions unprepared, but not the magistrates or the moralisers. The former fall for filmmakers' tricks – they present to the censor copies of the films which differ radically from those destined to be screened (the hardcore sequences substituted with watered-down content, to then be reinserted once they had acquired authorisation); the latter attempt to counterattack the new trend by the usual method of complaints and getting the films seized.

In the two-year period 1979-1981, the Milan, Rome, Genova, Florence, Bologna and Aquila public prosecution offices, often the driving force behind moralist associations, carried out numerous seizures of X-rated films. A decisive knock-back to the budding genre, more than these sporadic events, was the blow dealt by the Civitavecchia magistrate Antonino Lojacono. Between January and March 1982, he ordered the seizure of over 180 hardcore films countrywide. He (rightfully) presumed that the films were recut with pornographic sequences following the green light from the censors. Backed by blow-by-blow parliamentary questions presented by a revived Agostino Greggi and, to a lesser extent, by the DC member Giuseppe Costamagna, the mammoth investigation by Lojacono (which didn't even reach the preliminary hearing stage) caused the paralysis of the adult film industry in Italy for around a year and a half. The most worrying aspect of his actions – the adulteration of the films – was underlined in what we can consider to be the most relevant petition against X-rated cinema. Backed by a group that dubbed themselves simply “groups of parents and teachers from Monza”, this petition against pornography and violence, addressed to the minister of Turismo e dello Spettacolo and the minister of Grazia e Giustizia, dated 11 May 1983, asked in no uncertain terms that all shows or publications of a pornographic or violent nature be totally banned. The petition was signed by 29,314 people “of which 3,901 signed in the Friuli Venezia Giulia region, collected by the Diocese of Udine”, as well as a further 50,000 signatories filed at the Padova public prosecution office by the local Associazione Difesa Famiglia. This ambitious petition, which did not meet its deadline (or almost) for filing, did not prevent pornography from flourishing in specialist cinemas before reaching the homes of Italians, thanks to VHS, then DVD and, especially, the internet.

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1 There were however, judges who were more liberal, such as Generoso Petrella, from Milan (a future senator for the Partito Comunista Italiano) who in controversy with Trombi, absolves *Dolci inganni* by Alberto Lattuada with an unusually progressive motivation: «Changing customs, sexual awareness in the young, closer relations between men and women, greater freedom of discussion on education and sexual hygiene are not proof of regression but of evolution.»

2 Sicilian, friend of the powerful Ministro dell'Interno Mario Scelba, Novello, between 1958-1974 seized hundreds of films, adverts (including one with a topless mannequin) and books he felt were obscene. In 1969, the “strictest magistrate in Italy” (as defined by the press) declared

that morality in the country was on a sliding slope.

3 A practising Catholic, Salmeri (jokingly dubbed “the anti-sex priest”), hit the headlines when he complained about a Danish tourist wearing hot-pants. He was also a rabid seizer of “obscene” films. In 1979, he appeared on a TV talk show, going up against the porn star Ilona Staller.

4 The magistrate Bartolomei, when he took up his post at the Catanzaro public prosecution office in 1974, he had already headed eight State censorship commissions.

5 A sexual «escalation» taking place in world cinema, in *Il Secolo d'Italia*, 10.07.1968.

6 A film from the erotic-sexual genre, in *Giornale dello Spettacolo*, 18.05.1969.

7 Agostino Greggi (1920-2002) became notorious at the end of the 1950s when, as a young activist for Azione Cattolica, he founded a fathers association. Organiser of controversial conferences, like the one dedicated to "State, Cinema and Morals" on 23 April 1956 in Rome, the future member of parliament specialised in reporting film posters which he deemed obscene (Cfr. Mino Argentieri, *La censura nel cinema italiano*, Rome, Editori Riuniti, 1974, pp.144-5).

Greggi's censorship activism was the inspiration for *Il moralista* (1959) by Giorgio Bianchi. According to Rodolfo Sonego, one of the writers of this film, Greggi's role has to be viewed in the climate of the period: "I can't really say how the story was conceived. But I can say that the character played by Alberto Sordi – Agostino the moralist – was an exaggeration of the real Agostino Greggi and his phobias. Nobody who saw him in those years can even begin to imagine what they were... It wasn't the censorship, the laws of Greggi. It was the whole of society, the customs... There were infinite debates with the artists over the posters for the films: 'Pull this up, pull this down... Take this out, it's too much!'" (*Il cinema secondo Sonego*, edited by Tatti Sanguineti, Transeuropa/Cineteca, Bologna, 2000, p.59).

8 Salce's film did not pass through the censorship commission unscathed (three cuts and the elimination of a few lines).

9 Spogliare Romina provoca guai, in *Il Giorno*, 28.01.1967

10 An injunction ordered by the Genova public prosecution office on 11.05.1968, asked for five scenes to be cut even before Liberatore.

11 Il perché del nulla-osta a Dove vai tutta nuda?, in *Il Giorno*, 07.02.1970.

12 Aldo Santini, Storia del pudore, in *L'Europeo*, 11.12.1969, p.52.

13 Lietta Tornabuoni, I giovani crociati contro i film sexy, in *L'Europeo*, 03.07.1969, p.66.

14 Cfr. Id., p.68.

15 Id., p.70.

16 The film *La proprietà non è più un furto* was the object of not only a series of complaints, but also a petition addressed to the State public prosecutor, the attorney general, the Venice chief magistrate at the Venice court and the justice minister (cfr. Gianni Massaro, *L'occhio impuro*, Sugarco Edizioni, Milan, 1976, pp.109-10).

17 Cfr. P.M.T., La loro crociata per il Sacro Impero, in *Il Messaggero* - 09.01.1974.

18 Bernardo D'Arezzo, minister of tourism and entertainment in the first Cossiga government (1979-1980) was more sympathetic to the moralisers: the administration proposed abolishing central censorship, the introduction of a French-model porn tax and the creation of a circuit of red-light cinemas (which already, though, existed). Despite D'Arezzo personally assuring citizens of his battle against pornography, he never managed to implement the reforms announced.