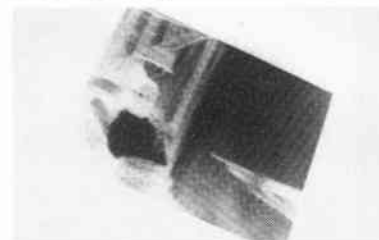


# CUTTING THE CRAP - A PROGRESSIVE FORUM ON CENSORSHIP



by cde David Berg



The Film and Allied Workers Organisation, Fawo, did not anticipate their intuitive documentary sense of timing when they organised their forum on censorship. It came at the end of a furious week of debate between Muslim fundamentalists and the progressive cultural movement represented by the UDF desk and the Congress of South African Writers (COSAW).

In many ways the Rushdie issue was a test case for the new post Casa boycott position. After much consideration and discourse it was disappointing to hear that the organisers of the Book week and COSAW decided to call his visit off, not being able to guarantee his safety. In its wake, it has left a paradise for cynics and right wingers. Salman Rushdie's visit after all was meant to go beyond his outspoken views on Islam and stimulate South African cultural workers who would also like to share ideas with great intellectuals of left persuasion. Was Salman Rushdie hijacked or is the cultural left

vulnerable?

The answer unfortunately is both. The losers this time round are the progressive movement, the winners the state. But the struggle is not over and lets not forget that

*'We need open debate and not secret committees that censor our material... we need a bill of rights to protect cultural workers freedom of speech and not censorship.'*

Danie Craven gave rugby a very good kick in the balls.

But it is noteworthy that the South African government preceded the debate by banning Rushdie's book, *Satanic Verses*. The Publications Control Board moved in to protect the religious views of Muslims this time. There have been books lamenting and refuting the Holocaust, there is a plethora of literature that opposes the basis of Christianity - why does the Publications Board find it necessary to protect the religion of Islam when

it seems very capable of defending itself. Isn't it strange that the theological arm of Christian National Education should rescue the fastest growing religion in the world from the pen of Salman Rushdie.

It begs the question that Fawo raised in kicking off its debate - "Under what circumstances is censorship justified, if at all?" It begs a further question - what is the progressive cultural movement's position on censorship and how will it cope with another Rushdie situation when it arises? But more important is the question for oppositional film-makers who look to a South African audience to communicate ideas and information for a future and peaceful post apartheid society. It's been a hard year for film - two powerful anti-apartheid feature films got the snip from the censor board, *Cry Freedom* AND *A World Apart*, not to mention a whole host of indigenous feature and documentary films that were

either banned, censored or given very limited viewings.

## Is censorship justified?

Back to the question - is censorship justified?

Sefako Nyaka, cultural co-ordinator, argued for no political censorship. He also pointed out that film footage cuts both ways. Film footage that reflected the democratic response to police action has also been used by the SABC to reflect their ideology. A way round was to draw the distinction between community based film and the multi-national networks.

'With community film-makers they make a film for and on behalf of a community to whom they are accountable. The networks are only interested in documenting the news of the day and maximising this news to outdo those with whom they are competing.

The events of 1984-86 made it to the TV screens of people around the world to show police brutality. But quite recently we have seen how this same material has been subverted by the state. This was with the example of *Suffer Little Children* where the Bureau for Information showed clips and distorted the original point of view of the film" he said.

Achmat Dangor's response was on principle, to strive for no censorship at all. 'It has been unfortunate to witness how many third world coun-

tries once liberated have adopted the same methods of censorship. We need open debate and not secret committees that censor our material" he suggested. 'We need a bill of rights to protect cultural workers freedom of speech and not censorship', he said.

## The principal that we should strive for is no censorship at all but the world wide reality is that censorship does take place."

Nadine Gordimer pointed out that censorship was part of the process of repression of critics of apartheid. She challenged South Africans to look towards a post apartheid society. 'The things that we stand for now will stand us in good stead then. The principal that we should strive for is no censorship at all but the world wide reality is that censorship does take place.'

But under what conditions? Both Gordimer and Dangor believe children should be protected because they are the most vulnerable. It seems that violence and pornography would be the two areas of moral offence that could be censored.

Gordimer argued that a producer of culture should be brought to an open court and given the right to defend his or her work if it violated societal values and was to be censored. She further argued for a code

of conduct for organisations to establish guidelines and parameters of expression.

For Mathew Krouse, filmmaker, actor, playwright and cultural activist, the issue of censorship is paramount to his existence in the broadest sense of the word. Many of the challenging cultural products he has been involved in have been banned, more recently *Shot Down*, the film and *Famous Dead Man*, the play.

He argued that censorship was an assault on the 'reasonable man', the majority of the people of this country. It is for this reason that state censorship should be actively opposed to make way for an alternative to a popular audience. He also cautioned that if this opposition was not done in a concerted way that 'conscientious film-makers could end up working for the state.'

He appealed to film-makers to continue to function to inform our people of what is going on and to overcome oppression. 'This is how we would preserve our art and our country.'

But the danger of the debate as a whole is that we could easily get bogged down in the academic notion of the perfect model and then spend the rest of the time deducing legal formulas to follow. This is not to diminish the need for law but simply to assert that the law works for those in power most of the time (in this case the minority) and against those who are not (the majority).

Cultural workers need more of a concerted response based on the the notion of democratic action rather than any-

thing else.

## The Repression of Information...

Glen Moss pointed out at Casa at the outset of his paper on censorship that censorship should not be seen in isolation but rather as a concerted effort by the South African government to repress information that challenged its interests.

The climate in which we are assessing the censorship debate has also changed since the times of Albert Hertzog, the then minister of culture in the early sixties.

Those were the days when TV was seen as a corruptible force, 'an opium of the masses?' That's certainly one notable shift that has characterised the 'reform period of adapt or die'.

We can now see full nude bodies on the screen, limited sexual scenes and so on. Is this the liberation from apartheid South Africans are seeking? At the same time there have been tighter and tighter controls on the media with the state of emergency in its third term of office.

## Reform and Repression...

This means that South Africans are invited to escape from reality but not to see it read it or hear it. Reform and

repression - husband and wife - schizophrenia yes - no wonder the right wing are so angry and confused.

## A matter of survival...

Censorship is not just a matter of concern for progressives and in this instance pro-

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gressive film-makers, but a matter of survival. Apartheid's children, born of schizophrenic parents, have to grow up themselves in a mad environment.

It is for these reasons that Fawo's growing pains are valuable lessons which other infant progressive organisations could learn from. The lessons are more deep than they are apparent. They look to a post apartheid society, towards a future they hope to enjoy one day.

Fawo's consensus is that they oppose censorship. In every other way the struggle continues for progressive cultural workers but also hopefully through 'creative responses to

Apartheid' as Sheila Duncan so aptly put it.

Does this mean that Cliff Saunders is welcome at any UDF or Cosatu event? There is a difference between censorship and subscribing to a set of values. The SABC, who distort information, are they welcome at progressive gatherings? If not is this censorship?

No; surely there is a difference between not being allowed into a gathering because you do not subscribe to a relative set of values and being censored. In fact we should actively encourage a cultural programme for the likes of Cliff Saunders - there's a lot for him to learn.

Fawo, in condemning censorship, joins other cultural progressive children of apartheid like COSAW, in discarding their illegitimate parents and taking the responsibility for their own views.

In closing the parameters of this debate one is reminded of the words of a very famous intellectual who hopefully one day might also come here so we don't have to have him telephonically open a book week. He said, 'It is only the oppressed who by freeing themselves can free their oppressors. It is therefore essential that the oppressed wage the struggle to resolve the contradiction in which they are caught. And the contradiction will be resolved by the appearance of the new man, neither oppressor or oppressed but man in the process of liberation'.



On Sunday August 28, 1988, an organisation aiming to unite Johannesburg film workers was formed. The Film and Allied Workers Organisation was launched by about one hundred film and video makers, educationalists, distributors and technicians in recognition of the critical role that film and video plays in the struggle for a democratic South Africa and hoping to encourage the burgeoning progressive film culture that is emerging in the country.

The organisation has as its aims to co-ordinate and promote film education and training, to facilitate distribution and exhibition channels for their member's work, to provide a means of pooling information and resources and to provide a forum for discussion for people involved in all aspects of film as well as with members of other cultural and political organisations.

### Using film to fight for democracy...

The launching congress passed resolutions resolving to use their collective film re-

sources to fight for a democratic South Africa; condemning the government's intention to impose a register of journalists which they believe would affect some of their members; condemning the seizure of *Cry Freedom* and restrictions on films at the Weekly Mail Film Festival, such as *A World Apart*, *Mapantsula*, *The Stick*, *Battle of Algiers* etc, and on the subject of the government's intention to change the subsidy system to a form of pre-subsidy said that 'although acknowledging the inadequacy of the present subsidy system', they reject any system that will rely on the evaluation of scripts by a government appointed body if it will be used to inhibit films that are critical of the government and promote those which show its activities in a positive light.

### Towards a more representative film industry...

The congress acknowledged that the majority of South Africans have been denied access to facilities and resources

for the viewing and making of films and resolved to establish their own training, education, distribution and exhibition structures in order to facilitate the growth of a 'more representative and innovative film industry.'

The congress elected Laurence Dworkin as Chairperson, Nyana Molete as Vice-chair and Harriet Gvashon as General Secretary.

Represented on the committee are film makers Manie van Rensburg, Kevin Harris, Mark Newman, Angus Gibson, Brian Tilley and Liza Key.

### An abhorrence of apartheid...

Members of the organisation include many of South Africa's most interesting film makers, screenwriters, technicians and community video makers. The organisation hopes to be able to unite their interests, and with all their members sharing an abhorrence of apartheid and a desire to live in a democratic society, believes that this is possible.

