

Electric Darkness/Stephen Volk for BS#7

“The Masque of Mary Whitehouse”

Here’s a small news item you may have missed from April this year:

Director and actress Sarah Polley (*Dawn of the Dead, Away From Her*) told a Canadian press conference that Bill C-10 would in effect allow the Conservative government to refuse tax credits to film or TV productions considered “offensive”. She was going on to testify before a senate committee against the measure she described as having the “whiff of censorship” about it, giving her government the power of vetting so-called acceptable content.

Read it again. We’re talking about *Canada*, here. Now this is scary.

The taste and decency brigade ride again. Telling us what’s good for us and how to think. Don’t even doubt it for a second.

US network ABC got a \$1.2 million government fine for airing a woman’s bare arse during a 2003 episode of *NYPD Blue*. ABC is fighting the ruling, saying FCC’s decision is “arbitrary, capricious, () contrary to the law... and unconstitutional.” They could add, ludicrous.

Directly below that clipping in the Hollywood Reporter I read that the PTC (Parents Television Council) has called for advertisers to boycott CBS show *Dexter* because of its violent nature. CBS had already edited the show for free broadcast, but the PTS obviously felt it hasn’t wielded the knife aggressively enough. (Unlike Dex.)

But the internet is free of censorship, right? Wrong.

During a 2007 live webcast of a Pearl Jam concert, AT&T muted some of Eddie Vedder’s lyrics. Among the lines in question, by a strange coincidence, were: “George Bush, leave this world alone. George Bush find a new home.”

It gets worse. The Catholic Bishop of Lancaster has called for books critical of Catholicism to be banned from school libraries, monstrously likening them to Holocaust denial. Whilst, ironically, one of the few films to take a critical view of religion, Ken Russell’s *The Devils* (1971), is still refused its release on DVD, in spite of persistent pleading by fans and film critics alike.

So who are the taste police, and what gives them the power to judge what you or I, as responsible adults, should or shouldn't see?

Grand Inquisitor of them all, of course, was Mary Whitehouse, recently the subject of a BBCTV biopic, *Filth: The Mary Whitehouse Story*, scripted by Amanda Coe (*Shameless*, *Elizabeth David: A Life in Recipes*). In it she was depicted as a funny, outspoken, heroic (if slightly misguided) provincial wife (the casting of Julie Walters said it all). In reality, Whitehouse was neither fun nor heroic. To the programme-makers who earned her ire, she was a monster who preached loathsome and narrow-minded values she erroneously labelled as those of the general public.

As a typical example, Nigel Kneale's classic drama *The Year of the Sex Olympics* (1968) was targeted for her vitriol. Why? Logic might dictate that, forewarning as it did of a Big Brother society of hedonism and desensitization, Whitehouse might agree with its message. Not a bit. *Sex Olympics* did exactly what the best drama should--explore, challenge and provoke; also what SF/horror does at its best--haunt us. But what it did to Mary was get her in a blue-rinsed tizzy. That's because she wasn't remotely interested in content or meaning. Her crusade for "public decency" was no more than a crusade of self-importance masquerading under the morality of the so-called Good Book.

Her battles were often with now-legendary figures of ground-breaking television: Ken Loach, Dennis Potter, Johnny Speight. She had *A Clockwork Orange* removed from cinemas, and wagged a finger at the *Doctor Who* serial *The Brain of Morbius* for showing--guess what?--a brain. But to laugh at her is misguided: I empathise with the writers who suffered this crass busybody deriding and crushing their work.

Perhaps it is notable that the BBC also made the young Margaret Thatcher fetching, funny and rather cute. The woman was Mussolini, for Christ's sake, not Lucille Ball. Is this an alarming pattern in BBC commissioning? Seemingly so.

It struck me recently that next year is the bicentennial of Edgar Allan Poe's birth, and, knowing broadcasters' hunger for anniversary tie-ins, I wondered if I could sell them on a celebration of the Number One Horror Writer Of All Time.

I pitched two notions. Either a biographical drama, perhaps based on the mystery of his death, using material from a screenplay I'd written years ago (almost a collaboration with Roger Corman at one stage); or else a new approach by myself and other writers to a selection of his most famous tales.

To me Poe was a heretical spirit, a kind of heady blend of Will Self, Stephen Fry and James McAvoy. I always saw him as a man whose imagination railed against the numbingly dull forces of polite society. He wrote fiction disguised as fact. He created the imp of the perverse and the first detective story. And not just any detective story: the outrageous conundrum of *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*--the theme of which, surely, is that logic is ultimately absurd. The only thing that is true is what's in the mind. His body of work, to me, is no less than an anatomy of the human psyche.

Word came back from the BBC. They weren't interested. Poe's stories weren't well known enough. Fanny Craddock and Frankie Howerd, yes--but Poe, no. I started to think, is this a different kind of censorship? The censorship of *ignorance*?

In Ray Bradbury's story 'The Exiles' a rocket travels to Mars a century after all books with "witch things and werethings, vampires and phantoms" have been destroyed by law. In a tower window stands Mr Edgar Allan Poe, in the company of Will Shakespeare, Blackwood, Machen and Bierce. They prepare their defences. Pit, Pendulum, Hecate's hordes, the Red Death. The rocket lands. The astronauts from earth see nothing. To celebrate leaving the old world behind, they burn the last books which they had in the ships' museum. The pages scream as they burn.

Book-burning is a common motif in Bradbury, most unforgettably in *Fahrenheit 451* (1953). In fact the value and meaning of books is a subject he simply can't leave alone. You could say *The Illustrated Man* himself is nothing more than a book in human form. The idea of the loss of classics of dark literature and fantasy in particular seems to plague the author.

In 'Time in Thy Flight' a school trip goes back to a time before they banned Halloween. The school teacher explains coldly to his class: "You, children, thank God, were raised in an antiseptic world with no shadows or ghosts."

In 'April 2005: Usher II' a man called Stendahl creates a replica of the House of Usher on sterile Mars. "All (Poe's) books were burned in the Great Fire," he says. "That's thirty years ago--1975... He and Lovecraft and Hawthorne and all the tales of terror and fantasy and horror and, for that matter, tales of the future..." Stendahl is visited by Garrett, Investigator of Moral Climates. "So you finally got to Mars, you Moral Climate people? I wondered when you'd appear." A robot ape kills Garrett, and similar Poe-inspired deaths face the moral guardians who follow the first. Bradbury's revenge for the death of stories he loves.

In *Bright Phoenix* (1963), Jonathan Barnes "Chief Censor, Green Town, Illinois, damn it!" comes to a beautiful library to burn books, the activity chillingly described as a "still, almost serene pantomime" performed by dark men "who wafted kerosene perfume." Again, Mr Poe makes an appearance here, too. But not before the Baal incinerator rumbles, spark-burning the lawn.

Meanwhile, back in reality, a teenage journalist in Afghanistan is sentenced to death after asking whether the Prophet Mohammed respected women's rights. A writer in Thailand faces two years in jail for criticising Tesco.

Here? In March this year, during a three week campaign, Metropolitan Police officers were told to stop and search "odd" looking people. But who is actually "odd"-looking? A journalist with a camera? A person carrying Gay News? Or a Jack Ketchum novel?

Montag is alive and well and living within the congestion zone.

And that's a sobering thought. For Bradbury. For Amanda Coe. For me. For us all.