## Human Centipede II: why banning violent films creates a new kind of monster

by [Luke Buckmaster](http://www.crikey.com.au/author/cinetology/)

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| This year conservative lobbying group Collective Shout, co-founded by fundamentalist pro-life anti-porn campaigner Melinda Tankard Reist, has claimed victory for two 11th-hour classification decisions, helping to overturn the government-sanctioned release of controversial feature films A Serbian Film and The Human Centipede II (Full Sequence).  In April a (twice cut) version of A Serbian Film, a psychosexual thriller from director Srdjan Spasojevic, was green-lit for release in Australia in every state and territory other than South Australia, the only state with its own classification board. It was widely available on DVD for around three weeks despite at least one retail giant — JB Hi-Fi — refusing to stock it.  Backed by Collective Shout and a South Australian DVD shop owner, SA Attorney-General John Rau urged the government to review the film’s classification. “Some of the scenes in the DVD are so depraved that I am not prepared to even describe them in any detail,” Rau wrote, presumably in reference to the drug-addled protagonist’s gnarly sexual exploits.  The Classification Review Board ruled in favour of Rau and co’s stance and threw the film into the banned bucket, slapping it with an RC (Refused Classification) rating and ordering its recall from vendors. Collective Shout proudly declares the decision [a “Win!” on their website](http://collectiveshout.org/).  The same fate befell Norwegian director Tom Six’s black and white horror film The Human Centipede II, which depicts the exploits of an obese social misfit who stitches 12 victims together, anus to mouth, for his perverse amusement. The film was granted an R rating in May, premiered at the Brisbane International Film Festival and opened in select cinemas in November.  Melbourne’s Cinema Nova advertised it with the prophetic slogan “see it before it’s banned”. A review of the film’s classification was requested by NSW Attorney General Greg Smith, again backed by Reist and Collective Shout, and Christian ministry Family Voice Australia.  The Human Centipede II was subsequently handed an RC classification on Tuesday, making 2011 the first year in Australian history in which two feature films have been approved for release then banned.  Reist was quick to claim this as [another win](http://twitter.com/#!/MelTankardReist/status/141417271737327617) for her organisation, founded on the principles of being “against the objectification of women and sexualisation of girls in media, advertising and popular culture.” (For the record, The Human Centipede II doesn’t discriminate between the people — and things — it objectifies. Men, women, humanity, centipedes. Everything). Collective Shout appear to be widening their purview with this [discussion paper on classification](http://www.alrc.gov.au/sites/default/files/pdfs/cia_2477_collective_shout.pdf) submitted to the Australian Law Reform Commission.  Amongst other things, they argue that films shown at festivals “should not be exempt from classification” (they are currently only classified upon request) and, in proposal 6-3, deceivingly suggest A Serbian Film played at the Melbourne International Film Festival. It played at the Melbourne Underground Film Festival, a very different beast.  It would appear from the outset that Reist and her like-minded brethren ought to be chuffed by their lobbying achievements this year, nursed by the belief that they’ve made the world a better place.  But in a debate widely framed in terms of accessibility, where media convergence and online distribution have irrevocably altered the landscape, the fact remains that banning films isn’t what it used to be. The film industry has forever changed and will continue to move further and further away from the grasp of censors, whether conservative viewers — or anybody, for that matter — like it or not.  In 1975 director Bert Deling’s racy Melbourne-set junkie drama Pure Shit, which features a scene in which a character injects real heroin, was banned. The film’s first screening was busted by federal police, who seized reels of the film and took down posters from the wall. It was later, in the spirit of clumsy classification about-faces, un-banned and released with a softer title (Pure S…). But the initial ban had taken its toll. Two dirty 16mm prints remained and the film was never released on VHS or aired on television.  “There were a whole bunch of people right across the process who were prepared to destroy Pure Shit rather than let anybody see it,” Deling told me [during an interview in 2010](http://www.spookmag.com/2011/06/09/pure-shit/). The film is now regarded as an Australian classic; a socially explorative and unglamorous drama almost — but not quite — expunged from existence by The Powers That Be despite its powerful anti-drugs message.  In the early ’00s, French arthouse film Baise-moi (the title translates to F--- Me) was approved for release in Australia then banned following a campaign by Reverend Fred Nile. A law-breaking film aficionado’s best chance to watch it would have been to visit a niche video shop and coyly enquire whether a copy might be lurking under the counter. The same logic applied for about the next decade and a half, while the internet rose and dial-up connections still made online film distribution virtually impossible.  One of the more controversial issues of censorship occurred with the banning of the film Ken Park due attention to a small group of people ( classifiers) making decisions on what Australians can and cant see. .The Office of Film and Literature Classification refused to classify it saying it offended against “the standards of morality, decency and propriety generally accepted by reasonable adults” The Classification Review Board backed them up and the film had to be withdrawn from Melbourne and Sydney film festivals  Almost immediately afterwards the ban was announced people around Australia began downloading the film on their computers and passed copies to their friends- many of whom no doubt wouldn’t have bothered seeing it if it had been cleared for release. Ironically there was nothing to stop it from being screened at the Melbourne and Sydney film festivals as festivals are exempt from the classification process.The problem was that a local distributor had submitted the film for general release first and once it had been refused classification by the OLFC, the festivals weren’t allowed to show it.  The ease to which a banned film can be downloaded and viewed raises the questions of censorships relevance in the age of the internet. But strangely enough , in the few years since Australians have had access to the net and been able to download anything from Ken Park to the Anarchists Cookbook to explicit pornography , censorship guidelines in Australia have tightened  But my, how the times have changed. A common response to the [banning of *The Human Centipede II*](http://blogs.crikey.com.au/cinetology/2011/11/29/the-human-centipede-ii-banned-from-australian-cinemas) was “I’ll just download it.” Reist and other pro-ban advocates may argue that fewer people will see the film in the public domain, in cinemas next to cafes, bars, schools and book shops, which is true. But no sane person would argue that fewer people will now obtain it illegally. Finding a copy online of either of the two banned films is as simple as searching for “download Human Centipede 2” or “A Serbian Film torrent”. With a decent connection curious viewers will have it on their computers in an hour or two.  The horror and thriller genres are stuffed full of comparability disgusting features rarely remembered or celebrated. There are more zombie and cannibal films than one could ever count or watch in a year. They come, they go. Eventually retail and rental shops don’t bother re-stocking them and even once well-known films disappear into the ether.  But infamy, as they say, lasts longer than fame.  For gross-outs like A Serbian Film and The Human Centipede II, their core selling point is shock-value. Now, recorded in the annals of Australian classification history as forbidden fruits, films the straight-n-narrows don’t want you to see, their bans have guaranteed them longevity when they otherwise would likely have sunk into obscurity.  They are now emblazoned in the annals of film history alongside titles like Ken Park (2002), Salo (1975) and Cannibal Holocaust (1980). These films are common talking points in university campuses, on the must-see list for many viewers who wouldn’t have heard of them if they hadn’t created classification controversy.  A Serbian Film and The Human Centipede II are now destined to be long remembered in an industry stuffed full of forgettables, and the internet makes it simple for anybody to pry open the cult vault and sample the sacred warez. In the online environment, banning films has become the mother of all free advertising, a shoo-in method for ensuring torrent numbers skyrocket. The days of films being lost forever, like Pure Shit nearly was, are long gone.  For Melinda Tankard Reist, Collective Voice, Family Voice Australia and liked-minded politicians, the truly frightening part of this year’s censorship debate lies off screen, away from the fiction of perverted misfits and sex-crazed loonies. For them, the real horror lies in the possibility that their actions may have inadvertently supported the very films they are rallying against.  **Key Arguments for regulation**  “Some of the scenes in the DVD are so depraved that I am not prepared to even describe them in any detail,”  “against the objectification of women and sexualisation of girls in media, advertising and popular culture.  they argue that films shown at festivals “should not be exempt from classification”  **Arguments that regulation has a counter effect**  But in a debate widely framed in terms of accessibility, where media convergence and online distribution have irrevocably altered the landscape, the fact remains that banning films isn’t what it used to be. The film industry has forever changed and will continue to move further and further away from the grasp of censors, whether conservative viewers — or anybody, for that matter — like it or not.  A common response to the [banning of *The Human Centipede II*](http://blogs.crikey.com.au/cinetology/2011/11/29/the-human-centipede-ii-banned-from-australian-cinemas) was “I’ll just download it. Finding a copy online of either of the two banned films is as simple as searching for “download Human Centipede 2” or “A Serbian Film torrent”. With a decent connection curious viewers will have it on their computers in an hour or two.  their bans have guaranteed them longevity when they otherwise would likely have sunk into obscurity.  **In conclusion the author suggests that whilst censoring or banning films may have moral merit , the freedom of the Internet enables possible more people to view the film out of curiosity based on the controversy of films being banned from cinema release** |  |