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BOOKS

I DON'T MIND THE SEX IT'S THE VIOLENCE by Enid Wistrich. Marion Boyars Publishers Ltd. £2.25.

Mr Whitelaw, deputy leader of the Conservative Party and its home affairs spokesman, has just told us that the next Tory government will strengthen the censorship laws. He attacks people like the author of this book. He says they "regard as antiquated and prudish prigs those-amongst whom I include myself-who believe that we have a duty to conserve the moral standards on which our society has been based, and so preserve them for future generations". (*Sunday Times*, 14 May 1978.)

Enid Wistrich, a former Labour member of the Greater London Council, was chairman of its Film Viewing Board in 1973-75. Her opposition to censorship in Britain today is threefold:

"First, it is an authoritarian act of formal political repression in a largely free Society. Second, it is a manifestation of paternalism. Third, it is a diminution of the individual's freedom to think, judge and choose for himself".

Why "political" repression? Because, says Ms Wistrich, art, entertainment and cultural artefacts contain messages which either reinforce or disrupt the prevailing ethos. Interference with those messages therefore has a political aspect, even where this is not suspected by the censor.

Ms Wistrich cites many examples of this "political" repression, from the earliest days of the British Board of Film Censors (founded by the trade in 1912 as a means of self-protection) to the present time. A list of grounds for censorship published by the Board in 1913 included indecorous dancing, scenes disparaging public characters and institutions and foreign customs abhorrent to British ideas. In our own day the film *Manson* is refused a certificate on the grounds that it makes the hedonistic life of the commune attractive and rejects normal social values. Ms Wistrich reminds us that among the flock of amateur censors today we have Mr David Holbrook demanding a total ban on public nudity (except for what he calls "certain works of art, where the overall creative intention of the artist demands it") and Ms Whitehouse pleading that if war documentaries are not censored the realism will so repel viewers as to sap the national will to wage war.

When one remembers that footage cut by a film censor presumably contains the most "extreme" portion of the maker's message, it is worrying to learn from Ms Wistrich just how many films have suffered these cuts. During the eight years from 1968 to 1975, cuts were required by the British censor in *more than half* of all films made for public exhibition to adults. 181 films were banned entirely, representing 4 per cent of films of every kind submitted during the period. This is indeed formidable interference with freedom of speech.

The folly of censorship is that it supposes one human mind competent to decree what shall be admitted to other human minds. This supposition is self-evidently false, but persists. That is because many adults, uneasy at their loss of infant-dependence, yearn for parent-figures to direct them. They

long for a God-our-father and create one wherever they can. That comforts them, but it is a child's comfort.

Censorship shows distrust of people. They are not to be allowed to form their own judgments based (as true judgment must be) on *all* the evidence. Other, better adjusted minds must intervene. What the masses see must be filtered by those with a loftier view, a better balance and a firmer base. No censor supposes that censors can be corrupted by what they see. Censors are supermen, above corruption. They thus confess themselves heirs of Nietzsche, Bowdler and Adolf Hitler. However well meaning, they fail to see that the adult mind needs to grapple with unfiltered reality. Rejection must spring from the mind's own processes and no others. Growth ensues.

Despite its rather silly title, this is an admirable book which shows its author to be a civilised, public-spirited and courageous woman. It gives a useful view of how film censorship operates, and makes a thoughtful contribution to the debate on what (if anything) should succeed it. Ms Wistrich is on the executive committee of the Defence of Literature and the Arts Society. With that body she evidently believes that "history shows there is no monopoly of truth, no permanent opinion" and that "the ears of mankind must be open to every voice, for new truths come from unexpected quarters". * One hopes Mr Whitelaw will take heed.

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*Evidence to the Committee on Obscenity and Film Censorship by the Defence of Literature and the Arts Society (18 Brewer Street, London W1R A4S), price 30p.