The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Cannes Winner's Lesbian Scenes Banned as Child Porn

By Alexey Eremenko

June 19, 2014



Adele Exarchopoulos and Lea Seydoux, stars of "Blue Is the Warmest Color," at the Cannes Film Festival. The film's director, Abdellatif Kechiche, is seen in the background.

A collection of erotic lesbian scenes from the critically acclaimed movie "Blue Is the Warmest Color" has been banned in Russia, reigniting fears that the country is edging toward cultural censorship.

Russia's Internet watchdog Roskomnadzor blacklisted a webpage with annotated scenes from the 2013 romantic drama, agency spokesman Vadim Ampelonsky told The Moscow Times on Thursday.

The film by Abdellatif Kechiche, which received the Palme d'Or prize at the prestigious Cannes Film Festival last year, has been approved for screening in Russia, though the Culture Ministry slapped it with an 18+ tag.

But while the film as a whole constitutes a work of art, an isolated collection of clips featuring the 15-year-old title character having sex with her adult girlfriend qualifies as child pornography, Ampelonsky said.

The actress, Adele Exarchopoulos, was 18 at the time of filming, but that did not deter the watchdog.

"A work of art is entitled to examine various aspects of society, even if they stretch moral boundaries ... but sadly, an artwork's integrity usually fractures on the Web," Ampelonsky said.

The watchdog only blacklisted the collection of sex scenes on the web. The ban will not affect the film's distribution in Russia, said Sam Klebanov, the head of the film's distributor, Kino Bez Granits, or "Cinema Without Borders."

Still, he was skeptical of the ban.

"The authorities in Russia operate under the delusion that teenagers know nothing about sex until they hit 18," Klebanov said by telephone.

"And besides, who cares what people fantasize about as long as they are watching movies for adults starring adults?" he asked rhetorically.

The film has already finished its run in Russian movie theaters, but its problems may have only just begun.

The League for a Safe Internet, a pro-censorship advocacy group with links to the government, said it would campaign to have "Blue Is the Warmest Color" banned online in its entirety.

While the actresses may have already reached the age of maturity, sex scenes featuring an underaged character qualifies as the "promotion of pedophilia," a criminal offense in Russia, the group's head Denis Davydov said in e-mailed comments on Thursday.

Censorship is a word increasingly mentioned in connection with Russia's cultural policy, at both the grassroots and government-levels.

The Culture Ministry previously censored foreign arthouse fare on the basis of child porn allegations in 2012, when it prohibited Klebanov's company from distributing the Serbian movie "Clip."

The film, which won top honors at the Rotterdam Film Festival, tells the story of a young teenager who deals with her family troubles by means of a sex-and-drugs rampage.

The ministry was also accused of forcing the Moscow Open International Book Festival last week to drop two plays from its schedule, including children's puppet show "The Soul of a Pillow," which was accused of "gay propaganda."

The attack on the festival came shortly after the plays' promoter, news website Colta.ru, reported that Culture Minister Vladimir Medinsky had been the undeserving recipient of an

honorary degree from Ca' Foscari University of Venice, triggering a scandal in Italy.

Medinsky, a PR expert by trade, is known for writing ultrapatriotic historical works, many of which have been denounced by Russia's academic community.

The minister, a firebrand conservative, has repeatedly indicated his goal of promoting statist ideology through cultural means. At the same time, he has denied inclinations toward censorship, which is banned by the Constitution.

Ultraconservative groups on the ground have also targeted artists and artworks in recent years.

Highlights include bans on modern art exhibits organized by acclaimed curator Marat Guelman in southern Russia and Siberia in 2012; vandalism at the Nabokov museum in St. Petersburg by self-proclaimed Cossacks in 2013 over alleged "pedophilia" in the novelist's oeuvre; and the expulsion of Polish Satanist rockers Behemoth in May over visa technicalities following protests by Christian activists.

Incidents of censorship have remained isolated so far, said Colta.ru editor-in-chief Maria Stepanova.

But the government appears to be probing its way toward a coherent policy to blanket all areas of culture with ideological oversight, she told The Moscow Times.

"I think they are just following the call of the heart here," Stepanova said. "The current trend is toward archaic mentality, it is just something in the air that everybody follows."

See also:

Culture Ministry Bans Film About Chechen Massacre Under Stalin

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