

TRUE BLUE

Internet censorship, the religious right, archaic regulation... Drew Turney investigates the rise and fall of Australia's adult film industry



In 2006, worldwide revenues from porn totalled at least \$97 billion, a figure Hollywood and the video gaming industry can only dream about.

The Australian adult retail market is worth about \$500m a year, but agenda-heavy voices in the debate and labyrinthine and often contradictory laws make it hard to find reliable figures. So, where does all the money go?

It might surprise you to learn that our home-grown porn industry once showed great promise. The Howard age brought on more conservative times, an interesting step backwards compared with public attitudes about sexuality. In the 1980s, an enterprising businessman named John Lark saw a niche within the national Overseas Export Development Grant, a scheme where the government paid back in full any monies spent promoting an Australian film overseas.

The result was the Mature Media Group, a well-known name amongst porn fans in the late 80s and early 90s, when Lark made more than 20 films in Canberra, with cheesy Australian themes, launching to fame local starlets such as Alice Springs and Kelly Blue.

Conservative Senator, Brian Harradine—the man who would later hardball John Howard into restricting the adult industry in return for his vote on the sale of Telstra—got wind of Lark's patronage and set about exempting adult films from the scheme.

Without the numbers in the Senate to support them, Lark's political opponents decided to try to tax him out of existence, introducing a levy that would cripple him. Lark took the ACT government to the High Court in 1991, bankrupting himself despite winning the case. It was the first and last



Senator Brian Harradine: okay with selling off Telstra, not okay with Australia's adult film industry

time a legitimate adult film studio operated anywhere in Australia.

21st CENTURY PORN

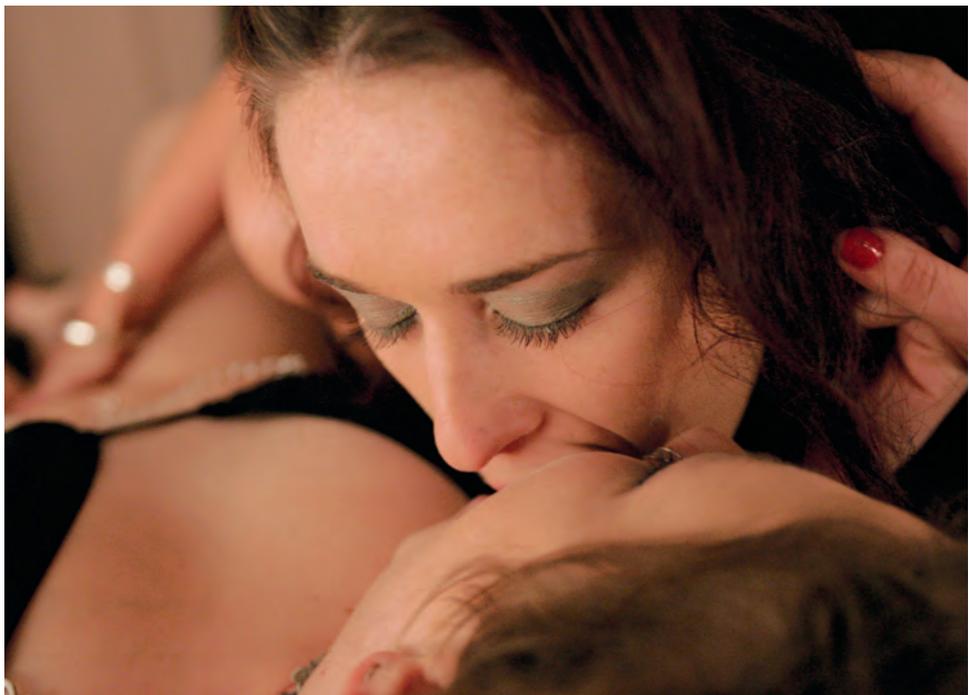
Today, Australians spend more cash on porn than Lark and his political enemies could've imagined, but little to none of it is produced locally.

A handful of US and European studios, such as Vivid and Private, virtually own the market, with the biggest stars, distributor agreements and legal systems under their rhinestone belts.

But Australians have learned to circumnavigate one of the strangest legal frameworks in the world in order to buy adult movies. Prior to its ▶

In the late 80s and early 90s, Lark made more than 20 films in Canberra with cheesy Aussie themes

The Mature Media Group was taxed out of existence, despite winning a High Court Appeal against the ACT government





“Australian censorship laws are even more restricted than they were 30 years ago, and lots of things that would traditionally go through the censors have been stopped”



largest market is the US, and the company wants to stay out of the local media spotlight to the extent that they declined to be interviewed for this article.

Struggling DIY directors such as Anna Brownfield—a feminist filmmaker who set out to make porn primarily for women and couples—has found the entire experience far too difficult, saying she’s now “moving away” from the genre.

“To do anything with [movie] *The Band*, we decided we probably had to go outside of Australia,” says Brownfield, explaining why her current project may not even be seen in Australia.

“Censorship laws are even more restricted than they were 30 years ago, and lots of things that would traditionally go through the censors are being stopped.

“We started making films at a time when arthouse films with hardcore content [such as *Romance* and *Intimacy*] were becoming mainstream, but there’s been a stop to that. It does make me sad that I’m living in such a conservative country.”

MONEY FOR SEX

The demand and distribution infrastructure are here, so if the political scene was on its side, could Australia support an adult film industry to rival the US and Europe?

When AdultShop.com bought Australia’s largest porn movie distributor—the Axis Group—in 2000, the latter was spending \$60-80,000 ▶

Australia’s adult film industry has been stifled by archaic laws and pointless regulation, while the US and Europe forge ahead



▶ 2007 election win, Labor’s platform supported adults seeing and hearing what they like, subject to adequate protections. But it’s a very different story at State level; it’s legal to buy X-rated films anywhere in Australia, but illegal to sell them in the States, which explains the ACT and NT-based mail-order system.

Making hardcore movies is restricted or illegal in most States and Territories, but the laws are enforceable under vastly different legal acts, and penalties vary from one place to the next.

With a hostile political landscape, the only home-grown porn is produced by a few low-key players. Aussie-owned website Abbywinters.com’s

▶ producing adult films that AdultShop.com CEO, Malcolm Day, describes as "E-grade" in quality. By contrast, it costs AdultShop around \$5000 for the rights to an A-grade US or European production. Hence, the Axis studio was quickly disbanded.

But Day says the situation could be very different if the law was on the producers' side; the machinery of distribution and licensing is there, but: "You're competing in a crowded market," says Day. "You'd have to come up with something different and you'd have to devote a hell of a lot of money—I'm talking millions—to marketing it."

But DVD and Blu-ray isn't only where it's at. Despite AdultShop.com reporting that its online video-on-demand service hasn't yet rocked the world, everyone knows that Internet-based porn will (and is) changing everything.

The pro-porn camp doesn't only want a strictly regulated market to ensure the products are entirely 'clean'—i.e. free of the violence and degradation the anti-porn camp tiredly holds up as proof of the industry's evil.

Malcolm Day says the unregulated adult market is doing the most damage to reputations and revenues. "Ninety-five to 97 per cent of adult films [sold in Australia] are either pirated or illegally imported, and haven't been classified," he reveals, highlighting the quota of films distributed

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by organised crime, where porn's nastier aspects often feature.

But as bandwidth increases and we consume more porn from sources not beholden to local laws or retail channels, all the political hand-wringing may be for nothing. Enter PM Rudd and Minister for Broadband Conroy's Internet filtering adventure, which set off another round of debates, and will ensure that porn in Australia remains a hot issue for years to come... ☪

Enjoy Australian porn! Turn to page 30 and subscribe to receive a FREE DVD!



TOP: AdultShop.com CEO, Malcolm Day, urges Australia to get real on the reality of producing and licensing adult films in Australia
LEFT: PM Kevin Rudd; WTF are you on?

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