1

Warning—"Political Propaganda"

The Case against *If You Love This Planet* (1982)

> This whole thing is a joke. It's as though the Reagan administration sat down yesterday and decided to ban films from Canada arbitrarily. This is total distortion.
>
> *Roy Cohn*

> I am outraged. I think the idea of reporting the names of our customers who rent and buy films to the Department of Justice is horrible. It just smacks of everything one ever thought about the year 1984.
>
> *Mitchell Block*

In March 1983, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences awarded Terri Nash, the director of the Canadian documentary *If You Love This Planet*, an Oscar for Best Short Documentary. Clasping the award with pride, Nash thanked the U.S. Justice Department for its role in "advertising" her film (photo 1). She was referring to the department's decision to label *Planet* "political propaganda" and to require its U.S. distributor to give the Justice Department the names of people who had purchased a copy. The academy audience roared with laughter.

During 1982 and early 1983, *Planet* had become a cause

célèbre for environmentalists, liberal journalists, and free-speech advocates. The government's decision to label the film and attempt to restrict its distribution raised questions about free speech under the Reagan administration. Maybe no officials at the Justice Department, as lawyer Roy Cohn suggested on ABC's *Nightline,* had decided to use *Planet* to warn off "subversive" foreign filmmakers. Maybe the labeling had no wider purpose. But shouldn't the long-range implications of such labels be considered? Wasn't it a bad precedent that a branch of the government had routinely

Photo 1. With a little help from the U.S. Justice Department, Terri Nash and Edward LeLorrain received the Best Short Documentary Academy Award for "If You Love This Planet."

labeled a film propaganda and taken steps to monitor its distribution? As lawyers argued over whether "political propaganda" was a neutral or derogatory label, the media, politicians, and filmmakers considered the broader significance of the labeling. Why is the U.S. government so intimidated by a small Canadian documentary that discusses the medical and social effects of nuclear war? More importantly, what does the government's response to the film reveal about the ideological and cultural agenda of the Reagan administration?

The United States government had been involved with censoring political content from movies in the past, and an overview of past acts of censorship provides a context for the Justice Department's actions against *Planet*. Because such a wide range of films can be called political, the term political content seems to lack precision. But one can't readily enough speak of the overtly political film. But one can readily enough speak of the overtly political film, as Terry Christensen has, as a film focusing on "politicians, elections, government, and the political process" that has at its core "a political message that the viewer can perceive."[1] Films with daring sexual content and other controversial subject matter have been more likely to be censored, but the Hays Office, the Legion of Decency, and a variety of pressure groups as well as city, state, and federal officials have censored political content.

Beginning in 1914, political censorship was most forceful when America was at war and during the McCarthy era, when the fear of communism and communists peaked.[2] In the 1940s and 1950s, nearly all movies censored due to their political content supported 'leftist' causes at a time when such sympathies were unpopular. In 1949, Maryland cen-

sors banned a fifty-minute Polish documentary because "they did not believe it presents a true picture of present-day Poland" and it "appears to be communist propaganda."[3] One year later, Memphis censors banned *The Southerner*, a movie that dealt with poverty among tenant farmers, because "[the film] reflects badly on the South."[4] In 1954, the "feminist" film *Salt of the Earth*, produced by blacklisted filmmakers including Herbert Biberman, provoked censorship by local pressure groups and the national projectionists' union. *Salt* tells the story of striking Mexican American zinc miners, many of whom were women; its production involved consulting many local miners and their families. While shooting in the United States, filmmakers were harassed by gun-carrying townspeople, and the Mexican actress playing the lead was deported three times. When the producers tried to market the completed film in the United States, distributors boycotted and the projectionists' union refused to screen it. Finally, the film was exhibited in eleven cities, yet members of the American Legion picketed many of the theatres where it was shown and FBI agents allegedly recorded the license-plate numbers of moviegoers.[5]

That films with controversial political themes went relatively unscathed during the 1950s and 1960s may have encouraged filmmakers to approach politics more boldly. The Supreme Court's *Miracle* decision in 1952, in which films were granted First Amendment protection, coupled with the dissolution of the MPPDA Code in 1968, helped reduce U.S. movie censorship. Terry Christensen writes that "1964 marked the beginning of a period when American filmmakers strongly criticized the dominant values of society."[6] What Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner call "countercul-