

PRIME MINISTER

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BT

Standards in Television

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Following the discussion with Rank executives of the likely direction which standards on TV will take with extra channels, I was interested to read the enclosed in the current issue of Newsweek.

While traditional French standards on television are very different from ours, the effect of increased competition on standards in French television - and in particular the greater drive to boost ratings - means that we are going to have a fight on our hands in trying to reach common standards through the Council of Europe's Convention.

Brian Griffiths

BRIAN GRIFFITHS



FRANCIS CANU—KIPA

Excitement on the tube: *Late-night show*

Midnight 'Bleu'

TV sex titillates France

It's 11 p.m. on a Friday night in France. Wielding a long leather whip, a snarling blonde in a shiny black outfit—bra, corset, G-string and thigh-high boots—is writhing onstage to loud canned music. A preppy young man in the audience perspires with emotion. He loosens his tie. *Cut.* Time for a music video. *Cut again, a few moments later.* The preppy, now naked, is bumping and grinding the blonde, bent over and still thigh-booted and snarling. As passions peak, a leather-clad waiter lures the preppy away with an ambiguous glance. *Voulez-vous, monsieur?*

Sex is hardly new to French television. Naked women have simpered in TV commercials for years; actresses are commonly shown in the altogether, languorously entwined in the arms of long-lost pals or newfound ones. But recently a new breed of programs has arrived to titillate the viewing public—and boost ratings. "Sexy

Clips"—which recently featured the preppy and his leatherite princess—has become a weekly fixture on France's Channel M6. It intersperses the most erotic music videos it can find with sequences of even more torrid striptease. And it's by no means alone. Almost every channel now devotes late-night air time to explicit sex. Cable station Canal Plus goes furthest, showing uncut X-rated movies. "Television is now showing eroticism, without any excuses," writes TV critic Philippe Aubert in *Le Point*. "Pornography has become an object of common consumption."

Leather lingerie: The tone of the shows vary widely. One, "Charmes," specializes in short, slickly filmed fantasies: a woman being undressed by her heavy-breathing vacuum cleaner or a young girl buying leather lingerie for her first "date" as a call girl. Another popular program, "Super-Sexy," does cutesy on-the-street interviews. Discogoes are asked to show off their underwear or are quizzed on techniques for exciting their partners. The station's reporters—so far, only the women—dress up as salesgirls and go off to model transparent undergarments; other times they might pose as miniskirted policewomen and direct traffic. Former minister of culture Jack Lang even went on the show to discuss whether or not he talks while making love. He never calls his partner "bitch"; it's not his style, he says.

"Super-Sexy" is a TV exec's fantasy, consistently attracting record audiences for its 10:30 time slot. Ten million households is not unusual, say the producers, and whole families often watch together. Michèle Belnoue, an archivist at TF1, who often views the program with her 15-year-old son, says, "It teaches him things." Perhaps with those viewers in mind, the producers try not to push the porn too far. The show has a regular striptease, but it shies away from male nudes. "A woman likes to watch another woman, but it's more problematic for a man to watch a man," explains producer Christine Eymeric. "We're very vigilant," adds a colleague, Bernard Bouthier. "No voyeurism, no violence. The people on screen shouldn't appear demeaned by what they're doing."

That sense of scruple isn't widely shared, however. "Sexy Clips" has graduated from a modest striptease *à deux* to harsh, almost hard-core, scenes sometimes near rape. Even so, M6 has received few complaints. "People keep asking for more," says Eymeric; "men and women, old and young, in the provinces and in Paris." Still, French television's explicit sex would probably not play well in a place like Peoria, the heart of Middle America. "It's a cultural thing," says Bouthier. "Eroticism is a French art. The Moulin Rouge, Pigalle, boulevard theater—*ça c'est Paris.*"

RUTH MARSHALL in Paris