

Assignment 1 – Essay

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Censorship and film classification is an important aspect of film exhibition and curation with its historical value easy to chart from the early days of cinema exhibition to the modern era. The first ever form of censorship legislation passed in Britain was the cinematograph act of 1909 which was put in place by parliament for the safety of premises due to the highly flammable nitrate base. Rather than explicitly being legislation to censor content in the films themselves it is an act that is based on the exhibition of film itself with Julia Bohlmann stating that ‘The presiding judge took a different view, interpreting the 1909 Cinematograph Act merely as an additional legal instrument to safeguard the public from the danger of inflammable films and deciding that all other conditions remained subject to existing municipal legislation’ (Bohlmann, 2018, p491) this led to the creation of the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC) in 1912 that was privately managed by members of the film industry rather than national or local governments as explained by James C. Robertson,

‘local authority pressure upon film content was sufficiently strong for all sections of the film industry – distributors, exhibitors, and producers – to fear an imposed central government censorship as some local authorities were advocating. To pre-empt such a move, the film industry approached the government and obtained the approval of Home Secretary Reginald McKenna for the establishment of the British Board of Film Censors’ (Robertson, 1993, p1)

To this day the BBFC (although classification rather than censors since 1984) is still a non-governmental organisation that is in place to classify films for multiple forms of media content. The BBFCs contemporary mission statement on their official website states that they ‘protect the public... empower the public... recognise and respect adult freedom of choice within the law... respond to and reflect changing social attitude’ (Our Mission) This essay is going to concentrate on the BBFC and their work concerning one controversial topic: sexual violence. This is going to be explored through the medium of two films that were released in the early 1970s, *The Devils* (1971) and *Straw Dogs* (1971). Both films have a controversial history with the BBFC and British film censorship whilst also sharing problems with the distribution and exhibition of the films in the United Kingdom.

Straw Dogs is a transnational co-production between America and Britain directed by Sam

Peckinpah that was based on Gordon M. Williams novel *The Siege of Trenchers Farm* released in 1969. The narrative concerns a young couple David and Amy Sumner (Dustin Hoffman and Susan George) who move to the British countryside yet are constantly harassed and face increasing violent confrontations with the locals. Historical reviews of the film were mixed with Roger Ebert stating that ‘a major disappointment in which Peckinpah's theories about violence seem to have regressed to a sort of 19th-Century mixture of Kipling and machismo... The most offensive thing about the movie is its hypocrisy; it is totally committed to the pornography of violence, but lays on the moral outrage with a shovel’ (Ebert, 1971) whilst David Kehr defended the film ‘the difference between Kubrick and Peckinpah is the difference between impersonal sadism and an individual morality strongly expressed... has the heat of personal commitment and the authority of deep (if bitter) contemplation. It is also moviemaking of a very high order’ (Kehr, 1985) as seen in both reviews the main combative talking point is the violence that is presented by Peckinpah whilst there is one sequence that upheaved the majority

of the controversy; The double rape of Amy. The film was originally released uncut in the United Kingdom by the BBFC with the X rating although in America the rape sequence was edited to obtain an R rating by the Motion Picture Association Film rating system (MPAA). The film was banned and denied a video physical release until 2002 due the Video Recordings Act of 1984 which put in place legislation that the Government policed 'The Video Recordings Act 1984 requires videos in physical formats such as DVDs and Blu-ray discs to be classified by the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) before they can be sold in the UK.' (Gov.uk, 2014)

The other film that is going to be explored has also had a complicated history with the BBFC and censorship, Ken Russell's *The Devils*. The plot concerns Father Urbain Grandier's (Oliver Reed) protection of the city of Loudun from the corrupt Cardinal Richelieu (Christopher Logue) is undermined by a sexually repressed nun's (Vanessa Redgrave) accusation of witchcraft. The film examines the relationship between religion and corruption whilst using the cinematic lens of extreme violence and sexually explicit content to amplify the historical context and content which the film is based on. Not unlike *Straw Dogs*, *The Devils* was also critically panned on its original release with reviews stating,

'It's a see-through movie composed of a lot of clanking, silly, melodramatic effects that, like rib-tickling, exhaust you without providing particular pleasure, to say nothing of enlightenment. "The Devils," in fact, is of so little substance, obscene or otherwise.... It just may be that there's still enough mystery in an X rating to make "The Devils" more popular than it has any right to be' (Canby, 1971)

The film contains many controversial scenes including mass orgies full of explicit content and torture scenes that are showcased in unflinching fashion, but the most controversial scene depicts a sequence named The Rape of Christ, 'One scene that escaped neither British nor American intervention is the "Rape of Christ" sequence, the finale to the orgy, which sees a large statue of Christ assaulted by a variety of rampaging naked nuns. On top of that, a sequence in which Sister Jeanne masturbates with the charred femur of Grandier after his death was also removed in both US and UK versions' (Scovell, 2021) this sequence was the main concern with the BBFC for censorship with conservative activist Mary Whitehouse (2021) deeming in the article that the film is blasphemous 'The thing I thought about *The Devils* is that, at the higher quality it was, the worse the blasphemy could have been' she also suggested that 'High quality doesn't excuse blasphemy. Blasphemy is blasphemy full stop' (2021). Due to this controversial material the film only managed to gain an X rating from the BBFC although this was only gained after heavy cuts to certain sequences such as the aforementioned Rape of Christ which has been completely cut from the film.

An interesting starting point to compare both films is the context in which both were made and the environment in which they were released. The 1970s was a challenging time for British film compared to the flourishing 60s in which British film had worldwide appeal as Paul Newland states,

'1960s British cinema, however, has received a relatively consistent, high level of critical attention. One of the reasons for this is that British films proved very popular in Britain, the United States and elsewhere during the 1960s, especially the James Bond series of films, the 'New Wave' films and the Beatles films' (Newland, 2010, p12)

The social context of Britain coincided with the films that were devised and created showcasing films from across the class structure of people in Britain with protagonists with working class backgrounds such as Michael Caine as *Alfie* (1966) whilst also presenting characters and stories that come from a

higher class such as James Bond franchise. One thing that both the characters and films share despite the difference in their economic backgrounds is the theme of changing sexual liberation in Britain whilst the protagonists themselves both have a similar attitude towards the change of traditional codes of behaviour related to sexuality and relationships. As an example of this, both male protagonists treat their women as sexual objects that are conquests rather than people to connect with 'Sex in the Bond stories is something to be enjoyed rather than regarded as a sordid affair... can be seen as an early stirring of the greater social and sexual freedom that emerged in Britain during the "cultural revolution" of the 1960s' (Chapman, 2015, p14) as Chapman explores here, sexual encounters in the films are seen as a non-risk, high reward situations that coincided with social attitudes of the era. Leading into the 1970s contextually and socially Britain left the swinging sixties behind especially regarding its cinematic output as Robert Shail explains 'British cinema was driven to extremes, sometimes in an attempt to attract new audiences, any audiences, but just as often to give expression to voices that had often been previously marginalized' (Shail, 2008, p xviii) this is where filmmakers such as Ken Russell and Sam Peckinpah come in as they already had a history of directing extreme films with a unique cinematic expression that catered to different margins of the film going audience with Russell's *Women in Love* (1969) challenging perceptions of sexuality especially homosexuality in western cinema whilst across the pond Peckinpah had released the revisionist western *The Wild Bunch* (1969) which challenged the perception of violence in American cinema.

Due to the fallout of the 60s, there was a need for directors with unique visions with controversial tastes to entice audiences back to the cinema to watch British cinema. 1971 was a seminal year for controversial cinema, other than Peckinpah's and Russell's films Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) was also released and was met with controversy over the sexual violence presented in the film. The sequences in both *The Devils* and *Straw Dogs* deal with and present sexual violence although in completely different context. The difference between the scenes in question is the fact that the sequence in *The Devils* is a metaphorical "Rape of Christ" meaning that the nun's in the sequence are not in reality raping Jesus Christ, they are ultimately defacing a statue whilst the wider context and meaning of the sequence is tackling the deconstruction of religious hysteria and delusion whilst the sequence in *Straw Dogs* concerns the double rape of an actual human being over a physical object. The sequence is considered especially problematic due to Amy's apparent enjoyment of the first sexual encounter with her ex-boyfriend Charlie (Del Henney) as Melanie Williams has pointed out in her text concerned on legal debate in media,

'For feminist theorists at the time, the first assault was particularly offensive in the depiction of a women who begins by objecting to intercourse, but is apparently seduced by the mastery of her assailant to the extent that she clearly experiences pleasure in the latter stages of the event. This even partial corroboration – of the notion that a woman's 'no' really could mean 'yes' (Williams, 2005, p71)

The second rape in the sequence is visually more explicit and violent although it does not have the consent problem that the first does which leads to how the BBFC dealt with it. As explored earlier the BBFC originally rated the film its original X rating. In America, the cuts that were deemed worthy for the film to gain its R rating reinforced the problems that the media and film critics had with the film,

'ironically, although these cuts were made to reduce the length of the sequence, they arguably make the rape worse. By removing much of the second part of the scene, and therefore Amy's clear horror at

Norman's assault on her, the suggestion is that Amy perhaps enjoys or accepts her experience. This was not the intention of Sam Peckinpah when he conceived of the scene. (Salkeld, 2016)

When it came to reclassification for video in the United Kingdom, James Ferman who was the director of the BBFC from 1975 – 1999 struggled with the scene and the context of what the sequence could incite on repeat viewings 'Ferman once again refused to pass the film, stating that the rape sequence was the key issue on video; a medium which permitted the replaying of scenes out of context. Ferman argued that viewing the rape scene in such a manner could be seen as a dangerous endorsement of the male 'rape myth' that women secretly enjoy being raped. On the other hand, he also stated that the film was too good to be subjected to cuts, but that the rape scene was too difficult to cut anyway' (Salkeld, 2016) Ferman here clearly worries about the effect of the film on the video audience rather than cinema going audience that would have to be adult orientated due to the age classification, yet he still respects that the film is an art form and is well made. Russell found similar problems when it came to dealing with the BBFC although he had an unlikely ally in director of the BBFC John Trevelyan (1958 – 1971) 'Trevelyan liked Russell. Of course, he had allowed *Women in Love* to be passed pretty much intact to. I think one thing Ken Russell learned was, it really paid to have Trevelyan on side.' (Dear Censor, 24:23 – 24:50) Trevelyan himself also seemed to care about the integrity of the art and the directors who's vision he examines 'I care very much about the kind of film that the artist makes. The artist may well be in advance of public attitudes. And he may shock but shock deliberately. I think this is fair enough.' (Dear Censor, 24:23 – 24:50) Russell's biggest problem came from the studio itself. Warner Brothers self-censored their and Russell's film, cutting the sequence known as the Rape of Christ in its entirety, as Russell stated himself 'Both Warner Brothers and the censor thought it was too strong so I took it out. Short of burning the entire film I had no choice. But it was really central to the whole thing' (Baxter, 1973, p210) the film has never included these scenes officially in a released cut although the British film critic Mark Kermode managed to find the cut sequences in the vaults of Warner Brothers archives 'thought to have been destroyed. But it was found by the film critic Mark Kermode in a film-storage warehouse and will be screened by Channel 4 in a special programme about *The Devils*' (The Independent, 2002) Warner Brothers still refused to show or release the footage to be re-rated by censorship boards which in turn meant the film still has not appeared in the United Kingdom fully uncut 'However, the scene cannot be legally restored to the film' (Gibbons, 2002). The footage was showcased in Kermode's documentary and a special cinema screening at the National Film Theatre in the Southbank, London. Kermode himself stated that 'now I want to be quite clear about this, Warner's in the U.K. have been nothing but supportive, but Warners in America have never liked *the Devils*, they didn't like it when it first came out... so to Warners in the U.S. I say this, you have no right to censor a British classic, you have no right to withhold the work of one of Britain's finest filmmakers... you don't have any moral right to censor it' - (Kermode, 2014, 2:20-3:45) a big discussion point that Kermode's words bring up is the ethical and moral discussion of censorship in the modern, contemporary age. Both films were released fifty-one years ago, and society has changed with different tolerances towards media content especially in the age of video games and streaming platforms. As stated earlier it still comes down to the tolerance given to sexual content especially sexual violence which has still been prominent in cinema in the 21st century with Gaspar Noe's French film *Irreversible* (2002) pushing the boundaries of sexual violence in cinema yet the BBFC passed the film uncut stating that,

'A shocking or unpleasant viewing experience is not sufficient grounds in the UK for censorship of material intended for adult consumption... There were fewer eroticising or ambiguous elements than in scenes of sexual violence in other adult films, such as *Straw Dogs*' (BBFC – Case Studies)

Eroticism of sexual violence is the concern of the BBFC rather than the graphic content which arguably is more severe in *Irreversible* and *The Devils*. As a curator choosing whether to exhibit films narratively focused on this particular content could come down to your own tolerance on how the context enforces how the content is shown and more importantly used in the wider narrative of the story. The BBFC clearly feel like this when it comes to following their guidelines on how to censor and classify these sequences for public consumption.

As explored earlier, a key definitive reason for the backlash that both films received was to do with the society they were released in. After the liberating 60s, the 70s acted as a warning as to the excess that had been consumed by the public could come back to bite you. The films echoed that especially with their views on sexual violence after the excess of sexual content and revolutionary attitudes that the swinging sixties ushered into the new age. The films were deemed dangerous and that fit with the decade they were made in as Shail states 'The turbulence of the decade that was ending was more than just a historical backstory for British cinema; it had very real consequences for the industry itself. The volatility of the wider economic and social scene was to be mirrored in the equality unpredictable fate of British film-making' (Shail, 2008, p xiv) both films can be classified as turbulent and unpredictable especially when it comes to the sexual content presented as if it is a criticism of the decade that had just come before. When it comes to examples in the films themselves, the entire plot of *Straw Dogs* relates to a community that has not moved on and seems to be stuck in a different era of time closer to pre-World War two than the swinging sixties revolution that had just ended the 1960s in Britain. As soon as an "American" (Dustin Hoffman) shows up all hell breaks loose with an excess of graphic violence from both the "American" and English inhabitants of the village as if to say that his arrival had unlocked hidden sexual and violent urges that had been repressed during the liberation of the 1960s whilst *The Devils* presents sequences of pure excess although predominantly cut to lessen the extent of the criticism of religion and corrupt political systems represented by the King and Cardinal Richelieu. Both use their excess to critique what they are ultimately presenting rather than promoting.

Audience response is the last key cog to explore whilst examining and exploring both films and the effect they have had on their respective markets. Other than the BBFC who had to censor and in a broader term judge the films to see if they were deemed fit for public consumption. Once released cut or uncut, the films were also put to the scrutiny of another entity entirely; The media. Media reporting and response to film is the major reason as to how a film can gain its notoriety as controversial, shocking, and potentially banned by local councils. It is an important parable to consider whether pressure from the media forces local councils and the BBFC to reconsider the rating and provide more substantial or less substantial cuts depending on the angle of the campaigns. The 70s was one of the first periods where the British tabloids really targeted these films with groups such as Mary Whitehouse's National Viewers and Listeners Association and national newspapers such as The Daily Mail and The Evening Standard. The media would campaign and scrutinise the BBFC just as much as the content in the films with Barber stating,

'It is difficult to speculate how a different response could have resolved the problems raised by *A Clockwork Orange*, *Straw Dogs* or *The Devils*. The involvement of pressure groups and the constant

scrutiny of the tabloid press called attention to the idiosyncratic and often unworkable system of film censorship, while offering little in the way of resolution' (Barber, 2011, p77)

The pressure of these campaigns came to a massive crescendo with the release of David Cronenberg's *Crash* (1996) with the controversy permeating the British consciousness in a manner that was unseen in North America where the film hails from 'the subject of the last great "banning" controversy for a new film in Britain. His vision of the erotic car crash got brimstone denunciations from the Evening Standard and the Daily Mail. This delayed its BBFC certificate, and Westminster council issued a solemn edict forbidding it in West End cinemas. But in the 21st century, the press appetite for denouncing shocking films just seemed to vanish, overnight becoming the quaint tradition of a bygone age, perhaps because of a belated realisation that these campaigns were destined to fail and didn't sell papers' (Bradshaw, 2020) Bradshaw criticises the intent and especially the extent that these press campaigns went to destroy and censor the film outside of the actual British censors in the form of the BBFC.

To conclude, it is clear that the 1970s tested the BBFC and their guidelines as to what was allowed to be shown on the big screen to audiences in a way that they had not been challenged before. The BBFC treated the films and in particular the filmmakers with a hard fist despite whether they believed the films had artistic integrity or not. The BBFC in the 1970s treated the sexual violence in both *The Devils* and *Straw Dogs* with the same conservative, ethical outlook despite the scenes both being completely different especially with the different contexts of why they appear in the film. The important aspect to take away from this study into Censorship in Britain in the 1970s is the aspect that one film has finally been released fully uncut (*Straw Dogs*) and one is still in the vaults of Warner Brothers with the original X rated version the only version available to audiences to view or screen (*The Devils*). This displays the importance that censorship still has when it comes to releasing not only contemporary films but re-releasing historical films in a time where attitudes have changed. This shows that sexual violence on-screen is still a tough category for the BBFC especially when it is also combined with a religious, theological aspect. As a curator and exhibitor of these films it is important to remember the context of the censorship and potential ethics of showing these films whilst also reinforcing the reason why they have been censored or the reasons why the scenes have been reinserted into the film in a modern context. Finally, the importance and pressure that the media placed on the BBFC to advertise their views on what should be seen in film rather than what the filmmakers or the censors themselves should present in film shows the importance that film had on the wider public consciousness and the power of how far the media would go to destroy a film's reputation just so they have a story to use which seemingly doesn't seem to have changed over the years.

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