Censoring the 1970s

Censoring the 1970s:
The BBFC and the Decade that Taste Forgot

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ABBREVIATIONS

BBFC	British Board of Film Censors, later the British Board of Film, Classification
OPA	The Obscene Publications Act which was extended to include film in 1977
PCA	The Protection of Children Act 1978
ITA	Independent Television Authority which became the Independent Broadcasting Authority in 1972
BFI	British Film Institute

INTRODUCTION

WHY DO WE CENSOR?

> "The case for film censorship is really the case for editorial control in the only important medium of communication which is governed almost exclusively by the profit motive."
> —James Ferman, Secretary of the BBFC, 1976.[1]

Debates about censorship are always bound up with issues of morality, control and permission and closely allied to broader social and cultural patterns. Film censorship relates closely to the tastes and changing notions of acceptability within a given society at a specific time. Within this work I want to examine a particularly contentious period in recent British history when individual films and the activities of the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC) consistently made headlines: the 1970s. In focussing on the 1970s period, my purpose is to consider what and why the BBFC censored and what this indicates about contemporary concerns and anxieties.

1970s Britain was an unstable and uncertain decade characterised by political uncertainty and economic instability. Sometimes referred to as "the decade that taste forgot", the 1970s is frequently cited as one of the cultural nadirs of recent times. Flares, platform shoes, *Carry On* films, ABBA and the Bay City Rollers are just a few of the low-culture signifiers which traditional accounts of this decade repeatedly reference. Yet recent scholarship has begun to challenge understandings and perceptions of the 1970s as simply a decade of political unrest, economic depression and little or no culture. The representation of the 1970s within the massively popular BBC series *Life on Mars* (2006-2007) tapped into a popular nostalgia for this era, and helped contribute to the process of cultural re-evaluation.

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[1] James Ferman letter dated 16 Jan 1976 from file JF/4 of the Ferman papers accessed from the BFI Special Collections.

Narratives of 1970s British film censorship appear to be firmly fixed and well-established. James Robertson's important work on the BBFC, explores this decade in relation to a number of key texts, notably *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) and *The Devils* (1971), but only considers a few films and covers the first half of the decade.[2] Tom Mathews offers some useful analysis, but his work is based closely upon the findings of Robertson, while studies of film censorship such as those by Guy Phelps from 1975, lack the benefits of hindsight.[3] The rigorous investigations of Martin Barker and Julian Petley into censorship and the media situate the work of the BBFC within broader discussions of freedom of speech and the legal framework, while Petley's most recent work maps the evolution of the censorship debate from the end of the 1970s to the present day, but pays little attention to BBFC activity in the early part of this most contentious decade. [4]

The BBFC as an organisation is often the absent present in debates about censorship, with a great deal of attention frequently being given to the way the Board's actions were represented in the press. This work seeks to address this imbalance by returning to the BBFC's own archive files and using this material to reposition the organisation within the censorship debate. The archive files offer a variety of evidence which sheds light on the moral climate of a complex cultural period and these memos, reports and notes reveal how extensively classification decisions related to the broader social climate and contemporary concerns.

Discussions about censorship still occupy a central place in the national consciousness and the concerns identified in the 1970s, notably those pertaining to the protection of children and worries about damaging and harmful content remain heavily present today. In June 2011 the Bailey Review, undertaken by the Christian group Mothers' Union, identified clothes, stationery, window displays, cards and magazines which, they felt, commercialised and sexualised children. The review received support from Prime Minster David Cameron, who observed, "I support this

[2]James C Robertson, *The Hidden Cinema: British Film Censorship 1913-1972* (London: Routledge, 1989)

[3] T.D Mathews, *Censored: What they didn't allow you to see and why. The Story of Film Censorship in Britain.* (London: Chatto and Windus Ltd, 1994) and Guy Phelps *Film Censorship* (London: Victor Gallancz Ltd, 1975).

[4] Martin Barker and Julian Petley, *Ill-effects: The Media Violence Debate* (London: Routledge 2001), Julian Petley, *Film and Video Censorship in Modern Britain* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011).

emphasis, as it is consistent with this government's overall approach."[5] Although he stopped short of agreeing to suggestions that reforms should be enforced through legislation Cameron claimed "[it is] my long-held belief that the leading force for progress should be social responsibility, not state control."[6] Such statements neatly support the case for restriction of the visual image yet stop short of advocating and approving outright state censorship. Such an electorate-pleasing strategy fits firmly with an established and frequently referenced right-wing agenda of "cleaning up" society, of seeking to protect the young and vulnerable and attempting to prevent the corruption of minds and morals.

This approach is, of course, laudable. After all, no-one wishes to see children sexualised or corrupted. But this strategy suffers from two basic flaws. Firstly, attacking popular culture and seeing broader cultural forms as responsible for a range of social problems is simplistic. Secondly, it is unrealistic to attempt to protect members of society from that which exists within a broader society - effectively trying to protect society from itself.. Numerous studies have sought to prove a link between behaviour and visual culture - but none have been able to do so with absolute authority. One of the central concerns within analyses of film and media culture is the link between the text and the spectator. As Christian Metz has suggested, what the spectator experiences is an 'impression of reality' and it is this which has proved so difficult to firmly define, particularly in terms of influence and deviant behaviour.[7] The way in which individual audience members respond to what they see on screen is one of the most debated, compelling and complicated aspects of film and media studies. One of the few things which *can* be recognised is that establishing the power and influence of the visual medium is by no means straightforward.

Seeking to protect and control culture by restricting material and imposing sanctions upon what can and cannot be shown, purchased or experienced is an approach which is as old as the censorship debate itself and sorely tests the boundaries of freedom of speech in a modern Western nation.

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[5] Polly Curtis, 'David Cameron backs proposals tackling sexualisation of children: Prime Minister supports Mothers' Union report, but insists change comes through 'social responsibility, not state control' *The Guardian*, Monday 6 June 2011 accessed from www.guardian.co.uk

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] Christian Metz, *Film Language: A Semiotics of the Cinema;* translated by Michael Taylor (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 4

Protecting specific social groups from inappropriate material is a method which, if executed vigorously and conscientiously, can ensure that underage children do not watch 18 certificate films or videos, or purchase alcohol or cigarettes. But these legislative safeguards are very specific instances where the law is used to protect vulnerable members of society, rather than to prevent adults from making discerning choices about what they wish to consume, purchase or experience. The law protects the vulnerable through a series of specific measures, but what the Bailey Review drew attention to in 2011 greatly resembles the Mary Whitehouse-led "Clean Up TV" campaign of the 1960s, which in turn was echoed in the right wing press during the video nasty debacle in the 1980s and the hysteria surrounding the Bulger and the Capper cases in the 1990s. All of these efforts advocated controlling cultural forms through legislation, ignoring the significant role already played by organisations such as the BBFC in acting as a buffer between film content and audiences.

Legislation cannot control culture. It can restrict what people see, purchase or consume but the cultural forms which transgress will still exist. This certainty is made even more convincing in the modern age by the pervasive sway of the internet which allows anyone to access anything they choose regardless of whether it is suitable, appropriate or potentially harmful.

Debates about the influence of the visual image on the young and the impressionable have a long history within Britain. In 1958 the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police Sir John Nott-Bower stated that he believed violence in films, on television and in other media had led to an increase in crime. He noted that the press, cinema and all forms of publicity seems to concentrate a great deal on crime and violence and that in his view had 'a bad effect, particularly on young impressionable minds.'[8] The debate rumbled on throughout the 1960s and came to a head with a print media furore in the early 1970s which targeted films by Stanley Kubrick, Sam Peckinpah and Ken Russell. In response to the public outcry, the Home Office commissioned a study into "Screen Violence and Film Censorship." The findings were published in 1977 and author Stephen Brody confirmed that no conclusive or firm link could be found between screen violence and deviant behaviour. The report observed cautiously:

[8] Sir John Nott-Bower quoted in 'Film Violence as Crime Stimulus: Police Commissioner on "Bad Effects"' *The Times*, Monday 17 March 1958, 16. Accessed via Lexus Nexus on 13 July 2011

> Children and young people may find graphic scenes of violence disturbing and could provoke reactions within the audience of disgust and fear. It is for this reason that retaining the system of classification is strongly advocated.[9]

The popular press has always been keen to prove the link between acts of deviance and popular visual culture and continuously and erroneously cites the influence of film, television and video games on behaviour as if it were an established and accepted principle. Without evidence of a firm link, the presiding judge in the 1993 James Bulger case suggested that extreme videos may have influenced the behaviour of the two boys responsible for his murder. Although it was never conclusively proven that the boys had ever seen *Childs Play 3* (1993) the film became inextricably linked with the case and extreme videos began to be cited as one of the key influences upon their behaviour.

Here it is possible to see a society seeking answers in the wake of an appalling crime. But some of the claims subsequently made by psychologists and by the media are frighteningly blasé, notably those put forward by the high-profile and oft-cited Newson report. The report's claim that "the principle that what is experienced vicariously will have some effect on some people is an established one" failed to take into account the complexities of the media violence debate.[10] The idea that watching specific acts of violence leads people to mimic what they see is highly contentious and takes no account of additional forces such as family background, mental state, predisposition and personal free will.[11]

The 1994 report was quickly challenged by Guy Cumberbatch, a psychologist from Aston University who argued that the Newson report was based upon "speculation fuelled by the popular press."[12] Cumberbatch also pointed out that the report had been commissioned by Liberal MP

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[9] Stephen Brody, *Screen Violence and Film Censorship*, Home Office Research Study No 40, HMSO, 1977 cited in Annabel Ferriman 'No Clear Evidence that screen violence leads to similar acts by audience' *The Times*, Thursday 8 September 1977, 8. Accessed via Lexus Nexus on 13 July 2011.

[10] Elizabeth Newson 'Video Violence and the Protection of Children' *Journal of Mental Health* (1994) 3, 224.

[11] Academic responses to the Newson Report and a discussion of the wider debate can be found in *Ill-effects: The Media/Violence Debate*, (eds) Martin Barker and Julian Petley (London: Routledge 2001).

[12] Guy Cumberbatch, 'Legislating Mythology: Video Violence and Children' in *Journal of Mental Health* (1994) 3, 485.

David Alton to help support his crusade for further controls on violent videos, making it part of a wider political debate.[13] Alton's proposed amendment to the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act suggested the banning of videos which offered "inappropriate role models" to children as well as any likely to cause "psychological damage."[14]

The arguments mobilised in this most high profile of cases were based upon old arguments about the influence of the media which had existed since the creation of film itself. However in the 1990s, unlike in earlier periods, the BBFC were able to engage fully with the censorship debate, rather than simply being held accountable. In 1994, then Director of the BBFC James Ferman offered some sympathetic yet sensible words of wisdom, commenting:

> The invention of video means most families have a cinema in their sitting room - and some in their bedrooms, too - with no box office to turn away those under age… The power of the BBFC has been replaced by the authority of the parent. In a democracy, that is the way it has to be. But how many parents use that authority? There is only so much the BBFC can do. We have to help parents look after their children. It is vital that parents take responsibility for what their children watch.[15]

Ferman was drawing clear lines between what was society's problem and what the BBFC was responsible for. The struggle between freedom of expression and the need to protect the vulnerable is at the centre of all debates about censorship and the work of the BBFC is, and always has been, to balance these two opposing viewpoints and find a middle ground. This becomes particularly difficult when specific films attract press attention and become inextricably linked to particular crimes and behaviour. In the wake of horrific events, knee-jerk reactions and calls for reform as well as the apportioning of blame are typical.

This brief foray through censorship scandals of the recent past has indicated how little the terms of reference which inform the censorship debate have altered; allowances are made for new technologies and new forms of viewing, but the central debates remain the same. However the

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[13] David Alton's crusade against these films fitted in with his agenda as a 'moral entrepreneur' and he also campaigned for changes to the abortion laws.
[14] Cited in Guy Cumberbatch, 'Legislating mythology' *op. cit.*
[15] James Ferman, 'Do you care what your children watch on Video?' *Mail on Sunday*, March 28, 1993, 20. Accessed via Lexus Nexus on 13 July 2011.

BBFC *has* changed dramatically in the last forty years, receiving statutory powers for the first time under the 1984 Video Recordings Act, and vastly expanding its scope and responsibilities in the 1980s.

Founded by the film industry in 1912 to monitor the new medium, the BBFC was a body without legal or Governmental authority whose job was to represent the industry and ensure that material passed for exhibition in cinemas was suitable for the general public. By the 1970s, it was an established organisation, but one whose legal position was frequently cited as an anomaly and whose decisions, policy and composition were often questioned. Writing in 1969, Neville Hunnings suggested that the BBFC's regulation of the arts was "paternalistic rather than liberal", a comment which reveals much about the way the organisation operated and the way in which it was *perceived* to operate.[16] Writing in 1968 Peter Lloyd suggested that along with the Lord Chamberlain:

> The British Board of Film Censors gives no sign of systematically seeking to preserve any particular standards. They seem primarily concerned with gauging what will prove acceptable to the reasonably 'broad-minded' middle class audience.[17]

Lloyd claimed that the work of the BBFC was informed by largely "patrician assumptions" about public morality and popular taste.[18] These patrician assumptions were also alluded to by former BBFC Secretary John Trevelyan who retired in 1971 and who wrote in his memoirs that, "in judging films we therefore take into account not only our opinions on what was or what was not suitable but also what we sometimes called 'the public social conscience."[19] Yet such an approach is highly subjective; the public social conscience is not a fixed and stable certainty but rather is constantly shifting and evolving. It is also important to identify that although the issues surrounding film censorship remain consistent, the way in which the BBFC is held to account within different decades and over specific events indicates how censorship issues are constantly repositioned by the press, government and by pressure groups. Any organisation whose brief is to censor has to move with the times in order to avoid appearing ridiculous. Yet how can this be achieved? The audience

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[16] Neville Hunnings "Censorship: On the Way Out?" *Sight and Sound* 37: 4 (1969) 201
[17] Peter Lloyd, *Not for Publication* (London: Bow Publishing, March 1968) 6
[18] *Ibid.* 8
[19] John Trevelyan, *What the Censor Saw* (London: Michael Joseph Ltd, 1973) 81

is not a homogenous mass with easily discernible likes and dislikes, but rather a collection of individuals who respond in vastly different ways to the material which they elect to see. One of the few certainties of the censorship debate is that what may offend or disturb one audience member may have no effect upon another.

As previous studies of film censorship have identified, the curious anomaly about film censorship in Britain is that it remains in place at all. The model of film censorship in Britain is highly unusual in that it was specifically designed so that the BBFC could be independent of Government. This was not the case with the theatre, which instituted formalised Government censorship through the office of the Lord Chamberlain in 1737. Yet theatre censorship had already been in place for at least 200 years prior to the extension of the Lord Chamberlain's responsibilities. As Thomas, Carlson and Etienne point out, during the reign of Henry VIII the Master of the Revels viewed all plays intended for the entertainment of the monarch to ensure that the standard of performance was fit for the ruler.[20]

Interestingly, vetting plays in this way allowed the Master of the Revels to be less of a censor and more an arbiter of taste and a judge of quality. This is very similar to the way in which the BBFC perceived itself in the 20th Century. Although vigorously denying that its decisions made it an arbiter of taste, the BBFC's work to ensure that films received the correct classification were heavily influenced by what they as individuals and a collective, considered to be acceptable, tasteful and permissible. A good example of this approach can be found in the files for Lindsay Anderson's seminal film *If…* (1968) where an exchange between John Trevelyan, head of the BBFC and Anderson indicate where the sympathies of the organisation lay. Upon seeing the film and prior to it being classified Trevelyan wrote to Anderson, "the film has made a considerable impression on me… what I do feel is that this film has something important to say, and I hope that its message will not be obscured or weakened at any point."[21] Anderson responded to Trevelyan's comments and thanked him for the time he had taken to consider the film, noting, "I

[20] David Thomas, David Carlton and Anne Etienne, *Theatre Censorship from Walpole to Wilson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) 7.
[21] John Trevelyan to Lindsay Anderson, letter dated 1 July 1968, BBFC file for *If…*

appreciate greatly that the overall impression of integrity and seriousness which the film makes should count in its assessment."[22]

This brief example indicates that the BBFC as an organisation and Trevelyan as an individual were clearly swayed by the quality, significance and importance of Anderson's work and so were making a classification decision based upon their own tastes. In light of this very personal response to a film, it is ironic that in the same year such an approach based upon individual standards and personal judgement was no longer deemed suitable for the theatre. In 1968 theatre censorship was finally abolished and the archaic role of the Lord Chamberlain in vetting material for the public stage was removed. Paradoxically, despite its anomalous role, in the late 1960s the honourable intentions of the BBFC as an organisation were recognised and as Peter Lloyd observed, "compared with the Lord Chamberlain's office, the BBFC appears large-minded and flexible."[23]

But even in the liberalising atmosphere of Britain in the 1960s, there was no question that film censorship would be abolished. The two media were viewed in very different ways; for Lloyd, the Lord Chamberlain's role in censoring the theatre appeared to be "philistine and negative" while the work of the BBFC possessed an aura of "respectable progressivism."[24] The pages of Hansard detail how MPs called for freedom of expression on the stage yet there were no such similar calls for the abolition of film censorship.[25] It was recognised then, as it is recognised now, that film is a unique medium and its potential to influence is extremely high.

This work begins at the crucial historical moment in the late 1960s when the abolition of theatre censorship abruptly called into question the precise role and operation of the BBFC. The 1970s was a difficult time for the BBFC and it is easy to appreciate the complications which ensued when the liberal left clashed with the Festival of Light over *A Clockwork Orange* or *Straw Dogs* (1971) or how religious organisations banded together and wrote to local councils urging them to ban *Life of Brian*

[22] Lindsay Anderson to John Trevelyan, letter dated 25 August 1968. *Ibid.*
[23] Peter Lloyd, *Not for Publication* (London: Bow Publishing, 1968) 22.
[24] *Ibid.*
[25] Hansard reveals debates about abolition of theatre censorship, but only a few references made to film censorship and the BBFC in the subsequent years. Parliamentary questions were raised on the role of the BBFC and the system for censoring films in 1973, 1974, 1975 and 1976, yet there was no debate about the issues raised and the system continued unchallenged.

(1979). However, in this period the BBFC was not solely concerned with a mere handful of contentious texts. In any given year in the 1970s, the BBFC certificated between 400 and 750 films.[26] When the Board was grappling with *The Devils* it was also working to ensure the correct classification for *Carry On At Your Convenience* (1971) and *On the Buses* (1971).

Film scholarship has begun to reappraise neglected texts from the 1970s and this work seeks to build on this trend. Peter Hutchings' work on Hammer Horror, Steve Chibnall's consideration of Pete Walker and Ian Hunter's work on sexploitation have all focused attention on neglected texts of the period, while industrial studies have identified the diversity of production and drawn attention to fluctuations in Government funding and burgeoning militant trade unionism.[27] Work by Justin Smith builds on that undertaken by Sarah Street and Margaret Dickinson, Ernest Betts, Bill Baillieu and John Goodchild which all address the complexities of the film industry in this period.[28]

My own work focuses on the operation, organisation and day to day activity of the BBFC throughout the 1970s. The Board's work in classifying films for exhibition in Britain can be carefully mapped through the individual film files which exist within the archives of the Board in Soho Square. Two hundred and fifty film files form the body of this work while supporting material has also been gathered from the personal papers of James Ferman held within the BFI Special Collections and files pertaining to censorship from The National Archive. This material has

[26] Figures taken from http://www.bbfc.org/classification/statistics/

[27] Peter Hutchings, "The Problem of British Horror" in *Horror: The Film Reader*, ed. Mark Jancovich (London: Routledge, 2002), 117-124 and *Hammer and Beyond: The British Horror Film* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), Steve Chibnall, "A Heritage of Evil: Pete Walker and the Politics of Gothic Revisionism" in S. Chibnall and J. Petley (eds), *British Horror Cinema* (London: Routledge, 2002), pp. 156-171, Hunter, I.Q. "Take an Easy Ride: Sexploitation in the 1970s" *Seventies British Cinema*, Ed. Robert Shail. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

[28] Justin Smith, "Glam, Spam and Uncle Sam: funding diversity in British film production of the 1970s" in *Seventies British Cinema*, ed. Robert Shail (London: BFI/Palgrave Macmillan) 67-80. Ernest Betts, *The Film Business* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1973). Margaret Dickinson and Sarah Street, *Cinema and State: The Film Industry and the British Government 1927–1984* (London: BFI Publishing, 1985). Bill Baillieu and John Goodchild, *The British Film Business* (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 2002).

been used to provide an account of an organisation which worked to allocate the correct category to every film submitted while retaining its independence and avoiding the perils of state censorship. However a work such as this can only attempt to understand and contextualise the censorship decisions which were made and to use these decisions to offer tentative conclusions about the society into which these films were released.

The films selected for study represent a small proportion of those submitted to the Board and some of the examples are drawn from outside the traditional parameters of the decade. Decades are not neat and standalone entities and when considering an organisation such as the BBFC which has long institutional as well as cultural roots, an approach which recognises "the long 1970s" based on a model proposed by Arthur Marwick is appropriate.[29] I have quoted extensively from some film files and referred to others only in passing. Some of the material is rich and detailed and offers new and exciting insights into the period, while other files have failed to yield any new information or are disappointingly matter of fact. Other files are missing altogether. Some files contain nothing but an official note of the certificate granted to the film and the monies paid, while others are stuffed with letters of complaint and extensive correspondence. Presented with such a range of source material, some of it sensitive or inflammatory, I have endeavoured to use it in an ethical and considered manner. As a result all the BBFC examiners and members of the public are referred to anonymously while those quoted and named occupied formal positions within production, exhibition and distribution companies.

Interviews do not form part of this work for the simple reason that the research is based upon the archive rather than the memories of those who initially made classification decisions. This is the study of an organisation, and its purpose is not to recount the anecdotal memories of BBFC staff and examiners. In asking people to recall events which took place 30 years ago, it is inevitable that memories will become cloudy and accounts will change over time. It is also important to consider that in retelling or recalling past events, "the narrator not only recalls the past but also asserts his or her interpretation of the past."[30] Interviews are not only about facts, but are rather about how the interviewee interprets and relays information

[29]Arthur Marwick, *Culture in Britain Since 1945* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991).
[30] Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, *The Oral History Reader* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. ix.

through the filter of memory. Crucially too for the purposes of this work, perhaps former BBFC examiners would remember the standout cases, but may have limited memory of their responses to *Eskimo Nell* (1975) or *Warlords of Atlantis* (1978).

This work is not just about 1970s films and avoids using detailed textual analysis of the films to draw conclusions. Instead it situates debates about individual censorship decisions firmly within an institutional context. Undertaking this work was not simply a case of looking at formal BBFC policy from the decade and then mapping the decisions made alongside it. Such a policy did not exist within the BBFC in the 1970s and this absence allowed for classification decisions to be made on a case by case, ad-hoc basis. Partly due to this absence of formal policy, I have also deliberately avoided a detailed consideration of the BBFC's approach to films which focus on specific issues, such as race. This is not because the material itself offers little of interest, but rather that my task is to map the broader activities of the organisation and not focus upon specific issues to the exclusion of everything else. I have used examples where appropriate to indicate the BBFC response and evaluation of films which explore racial, sexual, national and gendered identity, yet have not sought to *read* the archive from a single perspective.

Adopting a chronological approach has allowed me to map change over time and investigate the shifting patterns of taste within broader society as well as the personal prejudices and changing attitudes of the Board and those responsible for carrying out its policy. While a great deal of attention is given to the views of Chief Censors John Trevelyan, Stephen Murphy and James Ferman, the views of the individual examiners are also crucially important. However for the purposes of preserving their anonymity, the comments referenced and reported in this work are not attributed to specific individuals. During the late 1970s, James Ferman would discuss the composition of the examining team more openly, usually to make a point about the diversity of background and experience at the Board. However throughout the decade, the anonymity of these figures was preserved. Three female examiners feature through the 1970s, along with four male examiners. We know from later documentation that one of these, Ken Penry became Assistant Secretary of the BBFC in 1975 and took on more responsibility and a more public role.

During the investigations of the Government appointed Williams Committee into film censorship in 1977, more attention was given to how

the examiners were recruited and what kinds of people the BBFC employed. The BBFC submission to the Committee revealed:

> From the beginning the examining team has never numbered more than 4 or 5 of which 1 or 2 tended to be part time. On the retirement of a full time examiner in 1976, the Board decided to engage as part timers, two women with professional experience in the field of child care, a lecturer in Child Psychology at Reading University and the other a specialist in remedial teaching with 5 years experience on charge of pastoral care for disadvantaged girls.[31]

Throughout the 1970s, the comments and decisions of the seven board members offer an intriguing insight into the work of the BBFC. In the absence of formal policy documents, the film examination reports for individual films, internal memos, letters of complaint and justification, recorded disagreements on specific films and public announcements reveal the workings of the Board. This approach also allows the analysis to move beyond the texts as objects of study and approach draws upon what Marc Bloch suggests is a key part of the research process, specifically, "that which the text tells us expressly has ceased to be the primary object of our attention today… we prick up our ears far more eagerly when we are permitted to overhear what was never intended to be said."[32]

Of course one must be careful of such an approach for many of the documents used within this work are simply part of the internal workings of the BBFC and were perhaps never intended to be used to analyse its approach to different films or its overarching policy. Yet a close reading of the archive can offer a great deal for the scholar of censorship and in the absence of a range of other sources pertaining to this independent organisation, the rich and varied archive material is crucial for understanding the decisions made.

The position of the BBFC is still anomalous in modern Britain, yet by understanding the Board's history and the way in which it adapted to meet specific challenges in a complex and uncertain climate actively increases our understanding of the censorship debate. This re-examination of the 1970s uses the extensive and underused archive material to offer fresh

[31] BBFC submission to the Williams Committee, TNA file HO 265 / 2.
[32] Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992, 7th Edition), 52.

insights into the work of a film industry body during a precarious political, economic and cultural period.

PART I:

THE TREVELYAN YEARS (1970-1971)

CHAPTER ONE

POWER, PATRONAGE AND POLICY

At the start of the 1970s, John Trevelyan was at the helm of the BBFC. A former educational administrator with a public school background, Trevelyan had joined the BBFC in 1951 and became Secretary in 1959.[1] He was widely respected in film industry and government circles for his tact, diplomacy and significant PR skills and he steered the BBFC through the troubled waters of the "Swinging Sixties".[2] On his watch, nudity, flashes of pubic hair and increasing violence all appeared on film, with the proviso that the films concerned were all made with integrity. Trevelyan worked hard to establish cordial relations with the film industry, but he was also keenly aware that the censorship process involved working alongside local councils, central government, pressure groups and the press.

Trevelyan's views on censorship are perhaps the best known of all BBFC Secretaries. His autobiography was published in 1973, 18 months after he left the Board and he was a regular on the lecture circuit. However much of his writing has the advantage of hindsight; he was able to remove himself from contemporary debates by musing on the nature of censorship itself rather than having to pass judgement on specific cases. In his memoirs he reflected on his time at the Board and emphasised that:

> We worked on a general policy of treating with as much tolerance and generosity as possible any film that seemed to have both quality and integrity and of being much less tolerant of films which appeared to us to have neither of these qualifications.[3]

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[1] A. Pimlott Baker, 'John Trevelyan', *Dictionary of National Biography* accessed online at http://www.oxforddnb.com in March 2011

[2] James Robertson, *The Hidden Cinema: British Film Censorship in Action 1913 - 1975* (London: Routledge, 1993 2nd Edition).

[3] John Trevelyan, *What the Censor Saw* (London: Michael Joseph Ltd, 1973) 66.

This approach gave the BBFC freedom to make individual decisions on a case by case basis, but this broadly liberal agenda was frequently frustrated by the pace of social and cultural change. Following the seismic shifts of the 1960s, the classification system was amended in 1970. The X certificate became for over 18s rather than for over 16s, giving filmmakers much more leeway in the material they could include in their films. The notion of 'adult only' entertainment still reigned in the murky theatres and cinemas of Soho, but the new X certificate also allowed for films which had adult themes to be shown in mainstream cinemas. This would prove crucial for the success of the sex-comedy genre which was to become such a staple of 1970s cinema, but the new classification also benefitted sex-education films and serious films aimed solely at adult audiences.

One film which was to benefit from the classification change was *Percy* (1971) the Betty Box produced comedy about a penis transplant. The examiners noted that the film's subject matter would not have been considered under the old classification system, and that its content was only just suitable for the new X category.[4] Even then, Trevelyan personally requested the removal of a female flagellation expert from one scene, a move which suggested that risqué content would still be carefully monitored, even at the highest classification.[5] While the film's narrative was deemed acceptable, this perceived sexual perversion was not, thus indicating that the new X certificate was still closely allied to standards of acceptability.[6]

Concerns about acceptability were not simply restricted to the BBFC; these debates also played a pivotal role in what was broadcast on television. Programmes produced for the BBC were subject to editorial control at production level, and if it was deemed particularly contentious, the department head or programme controller became involved. A BBC produced-pamphlet from 1967 described these in-house processes of editorial control as:

> More akin to similar processes in large newspapers than they are to the machinery of censorship in the theatre and film industry. Newspapers act within the laws of libel and obscenity and are tempered by the need to

[4] BBFC file for *Percy.*
[5] *Ibid.*
[6] Other films were confined to the X category due to their subject matter and treatment in this period. Another analogous case would be *The Beast in the Cellar.*

> maintain an editorial policy and a relationship with their readers. The BBC acts similarly.[7]

By contrast, the Independent Television Authority (ITA) which scrutinised programmes to be broadcast on ITV worked in a way similar to the BBFC.[8] The ITA received submissions from a range of regional broadcasters, just as the BBFC examined films from all sections of the film industry. Both organisations viewed submitted material on a case by case basis and made decisions based upon notions of acceptability and popular taste. The ITA files reveal how the organisation responded to specific contentious issues, but more specifically indicate how the ITA and the BBFC collaborated in order to ensure parity between television and film censorship.

The ITA files reveal the friendship and the working relationship which existed between Sir Robert Frazer, Director General of the ITA, and John Trevelyan. In 1961, both were approached by Granada Television to participate in a programme about censorship of film and television material organised by the Television and Screenwriters Guild. Trevelyan and Frazer both objected to the way in which the programme was planned with Frazer considering it to be "heavily loaded with anti-censorship emotion."[9] Trevelyan agreed and pointed out to Frazer that he had been approached by the programme makers and asked to comment on censored film material as well as offering an opinion on television material. Trevelyan explained how he had refused to comply with either of these requests and cited the confidential nature of film censorship and the unspoken "gentleman's agreement" which prevented either the BBFC or the film companies involved from publicly commenting on specific censorship decisions.[10]

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[7] BBC, *Control of subject matter in BBC Programmes* (London: BBC London Publishing, undated circa 1967)

[8] The Independent Television Authority became the Independent Broadcasting Authority in 1972 but for clarity is referred to as the ITA throughout this and all subsequent chapters.

[9] Robert Frazer letter to John Trevelyan, 18 January 1961. Accessed from file Censorship and Banning, Drama Internal Policy Volume I, held within the ITA archive at the University of Bournemouth.

[10] John Trevelyan letter to Bob Frazer, 17 January 1961. Accessed from file Censorship and Banning, Drama Internal Policy Volume I, held within the ITA archive at the University of Bournemouth.

Trevelyan wrote formally to offer his support to Frazer outlining his objections to the proposed programme and giving the ITA crucial ammunition to help prevent the programme being made. As well as this formal declaration of solidarity and support, Trevelyan also wrote informally to Frazer and gave him his blessing to use his more formal letter in any way he wished, writing:

> The position about this programme is clearly very tricky... I will treat the whole thing with great caution and keep in close touch with you about it. You may be sure that I shall do nothing which will make your position more difficult than it already is. I will commit myself to nothing without prior consultation with you.[11]

Frazer responded by thanking Trevelyan for the support but stated that he would, "hold his official letter in reserve, for I do not wish to expose you to the possible accusation that you have influenced us against the programme."[12] The most important part of Trevelyan's letter is the information he gives Frazer about attempts made to contact film companies to gain examples of censored material (which was illegal) and their queries to Trevelyan himself about commenting on television material (which was inappropriate for a film censor). Such actions placed the Granada filmmakers outside the parameters of acceptable behaviour and Frazer acted swiftly to ensure that the proposed programme was not made.

The ease with which the two men write to each other – their letters begin "My dear Bob" and "My dear John" – suggests an established friendship as well as a professional working relationship. Such relationships were part of Trevelyan's way of working but it is interesting to see in the relationship between the ITA and the BBFC such a united approach to the issue of censorship.. Trevelyan had only been chief censor for three years by 1961, but he had already established crucial industry contacts and was keen for there to be a similarity of approach as well as mutual respect between those working in the film and television industries.

Collaboration between film and television also had other benefits, with difficult decisions occasionally being deflected by an alternative medium.

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[11] *Ibid.*

[12] Robert Frazer letter to John Trevelyan, 18 January 1961. Accessed from file Censorship and Banning, Drama Internal Policy Volume I, held within the ITA archive at the University of Bournemouth.