

Video release reveals flaws in censorship

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THE muddled thinking behind Britain's video censorship policy became evident last week as the authority responsible for granting certificates took up two contradictory stands.

Twenty-five years after the horror film *The Exorcist*, with its infamous scenes of projectile vomiting and spinning heads, was first released in British cinemas, the British Board of Film Classification still refuses to allow it to be shown in the family home. On the other hand, an uncut version of David Cronenberg's *Crash*, one of the most disturbing and controversial films of recent years, has been cleared for domestic viewing and will be released on video on 24 June.

The conflicting verdicts on these films from censor James Firman, who is shortly to leave his post after 23 years, have not gone unnoticed.

A coalition of Christian and Muslim fundamentalists is already urging video stores not to stock *Crash*. The group, which includes Yusuf Islam, the former singer Cat Stevens, believes it can call on the support of up to 105,000 members across both faiths who will boycott any store that puts *Crash* on its shelves.

The film should have been banned from the start, the coalition believes, because of its perverse depiction of human sexuality woven into the violent imagery of road carnage.

"We will be deciding how exactly we can most effectively affect the release of this kind of video," said Chris Demetriou, the pastor at the head of the fundamentalist Cornerstone Ministries group of churches based in Esher, Surrey.

The decision to allow *Crash* to be released without cuts has been seized on by others, however, as a sign of a more liberal attitude at the censorship board.

Mr Firman's successor as director, whoever that may be, is unlikely to wield quite the same power, because Andreas Whittam Smith, the founding father of the Independent newspaper, has already been appointed president of the board and only agreed to take up the post on the condition that he would have ultimate responsibility for its decisions.

Those opposed to current censorship criteria in Britain, including J G Ballard, the author of the book on which *Crash* is based, are optimistic that Mr Whittam Smith's reign will be

characterised by less restrictive rulings. "If the decision to release Crash just as it was made was influenced by him, then I applaud it and hope it's part of a new trend," he said.

The film, starring Holly Hunter and James Spader, revolves around the lives of people who are sexually stimulated by the sight of car crashes - an idea that has become especially disturbing since the death of the Princess of Wales.

But Mr Ballard argues that it is a "brilliant and original" film, one of the controversial director's best to date.

"No one who sees it will miss the dreamlike quality and they will realise the absurdity of the original controversy," he said. "This film does not assume that anyone would take it literally."

Those crusading on behalf of The Exorcist make similar claims for its content. Its supporters claim that it has much to say about the power of religion, about the difference between good and evil and about family dynamics.

"When I first saw even the trailer in a cinema I was beside myself," said Mark Kermode, a writer and long-standing fan of the film, who presented The Fear of God, last night's BBC2 examination of its continuing potency. "It is terrifying, but it is much more than just a horror film. Only a small section of the footage is like that; the rest is drama, even comedy, with some very interesting things to say.

"Let us hope that as Firman's reign comes to an end the whole thing will open up."

It is likely, however, that the BBFC's determination to keep The Exorcist out of British homes will turn out to be more typical of the new regime than the comparatively relaxed attitude to Crash.

The Home Secretary, Jack Straw, appointed Mr Whittam Smith during an outburst of public fury about pornographic and violent videos. He is thought to be relying on the former newspaperman for strong decisions on domestic releases.

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/video-release-reveals-flaws-in-censorship-1164891.html>