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CENSORED



**What They Didn't Allow You to See, And Why:
The Story of Film Censorship in Britain**

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On the other hand, in a period when nearly half the films being submitted to the BBFC were cut, it is perhaps questionable whether it was worth the sacrifice to receive an 'A' certificate. In effect, any film that did not make an allowance for the presence of children within the audience was altered by the censor. The young hero in Buñuel's *Los Olivados* (1950) lost his motivation for revenge with a pivotal scene in which one of the street kids is bludgeoned to death with a rock; Autant-Lara's tragic love story, *Le Diable au Corps*, whose international success revived the French film industry in 1946, had over ten minutes removed from its British version; even more footage was cut from *Bitter Rice* (1948), including the scene from the famous poster featuring Silvana Mangano in a rice field with skirts tucked up exposing her thighs above black stockings, which, according to one frustrated critic, 'looked infinitely worth the parting', and the reason for Ray Milland's dipsomania disappeared amongst two major sequences from Billy Wilder's *Lost Weekend*. Four years later, in 1950, the same director had a crucial line revealing Norma Desmond's (Gloria Swanson) past affair with her butler (Erich von Stroheim) deleted from his bitter-sweet homage to Hollywood, *Sunset Boulevard*.

By 1950 Watkins himself admitted that the situation had got out of hand. 'I went to the premiere of the French film *Passionelle* (1949),' he was reported as saying, 'and I found that some of the cuts made by my own Board so absurd that I had them restored next morning.'

Ironically, the Board's opponents in local government brought about the solution to Watkins's problem. Responding to pressure from the local councils, the government set up a committee in December 1949 to investigate the censorship system, and the following year the Wheare Committee recommended: 'A single category of films, which should include the present "H" [Horror] category from which children should be excluded . . . The category might be called "X".'

Once the Board had adopted the 'X' certificate in January 1951, it was



Italian neo-realist films such as the rural *Bitter Rice* (1948) proved too realistic for the censor.



Carol (Catherine Deneuve) listens to her sister making love in *Repulsion* (1965) and then hears the first orgasm in British cinema.

Neither of these mid-sixties films was consigned to darkness, however, as both immediately gained an 'X' certificate from the GLC. Now it seemed that what one censor could take away, another one in the form of a local authority could give back; but Britain's local authorities had not expressed an interest in film censorship for nearly forty years. What had woken the councils from their long slumber? And even more to the point, who was responsible for prodding this 470-headed demon awake? The answer to both questions is John Trevelyan.



Mick Jagger with Anita Pallenburg and Michèle Breton in *Performance* (1968). 'Even the bath water is dirty,' complained a Warners' executive.

by a girlfriend during a love scene, should be extensively re-edited. Yet it was the clawing, not the sight of Fox's torso being shredded by a whip that Trevelyan wanted removed. He said he could not endorse an explicit statement of Chas's sado-masochism and when Donald Cammell pointed out that the deletion of this piece of character development would render the scene gratuitously violent Trevelyan replied, 'so be it.' The argument was then rendered redundant, anyway, because Warners pre-empted the Board and took out the intercutting.

The new classification did at least allow Trevelyan to retrieve one film that he had banned with some misgivings at about the same time that *Performance* went into production in 1968. Loosely based on *Midnight Cowboy*, which was simultaneously being filmed in Manhattan, Andy Warhol's *Flesh* revolved around a day in the life of a male prostitute (Joe Dallessandro) who is persuaded by his wife to get out of bed and go to work in order to hustle the money for a friend's abortion. Shot in four days at a cost of \$4,000, the film reflected the cinematic style of Warhol's earlier films, of which he said: 'The lighting is bad, the camera work is bad, the sound is bad, but the people are beautiful.'

In spite of a scene in which a teenage girl (Geraldine Smith) ties a bow around Joe Dallessandro's penis – thereby engendering the first erection to be shown on the British screen – Trevelyan personally liked *Flesh*; but being wary once again of public reaction he suggested to the film's distributor, Jimmie



The censor's treatment of the rape scene in Sam Peckinpah's *Straw Dogs* (1971) turned a crisis into a drama.

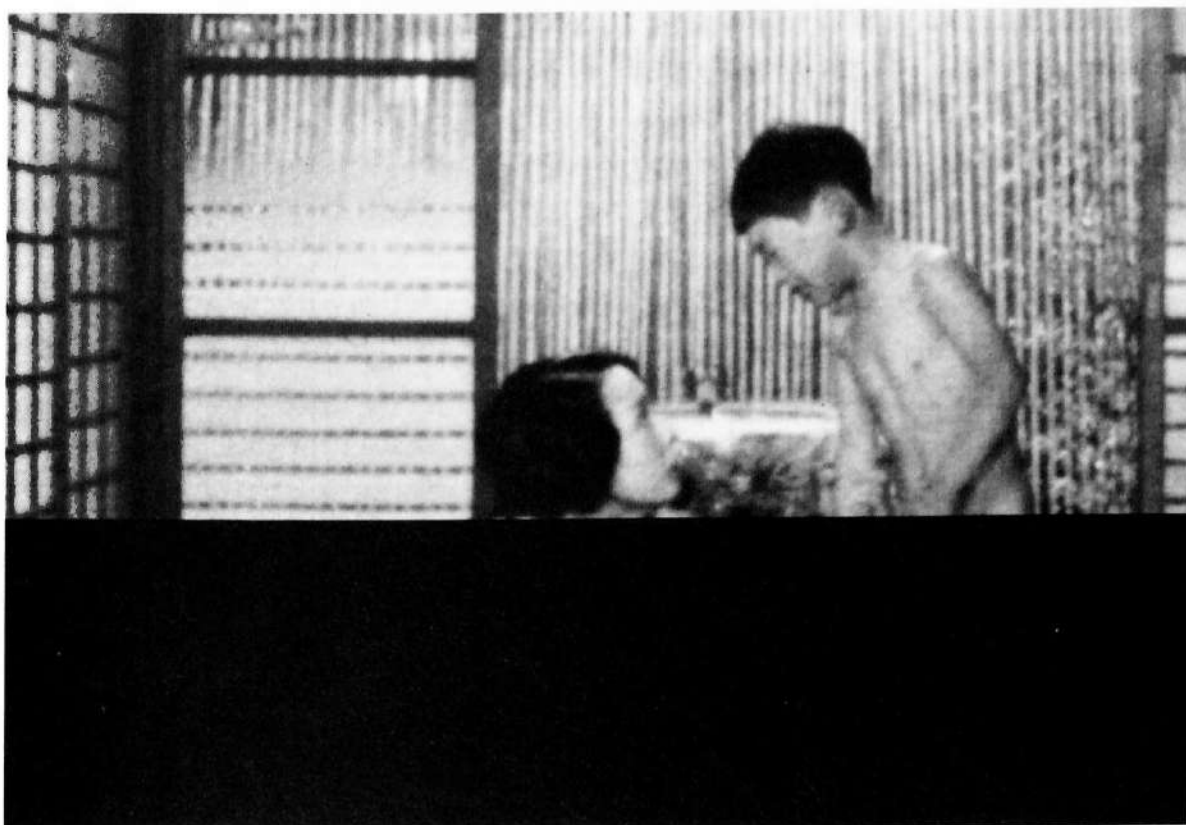
examiners found it difficult in subsequent conversations about the scene to persuade their Secretary that sex from the rear was not necessarily sodomy. As a sop to his own dignity the distraught chief censor appended a face-saving note to his examiner's report bemoaning the fact that it was now too late to re-cut the film; its editing had been completed, 'so I fear there is nothing we can do about it, save a show of righteous indignation when accused.'

Some years later James Ferman, the current Secretary of the Board, found himself presented with the opportunity to satisfy his own curiosity about this sexual slip when he was introduced to the film's 'victim', Susan George. What

on a more rational and deliberate footing'. Understandably, the Board had a lot to fear from such words. Also, the inclusion on the committee of liberal writers such as the film critic David Robinson, the psychotherapist Anthony Storr and the social affairs journalist Polly Toynbee suggested that the committee's final report would question the necessity of adult film censorship.

Ultimately, though, the only conclusion that can be drawn from the Williams Committee was its sheer unpredictability. In their two years of deliberation the committee heard the Festival of Light line up alongside the Association of Metropolitan Authorities in favour of ending local censorship; they listened to the BBFC defend local authority interference as 'a safety valve'; they noted the GLC's request for state censorship; and heard a spokesman for film exhibitors argue that, 'the cinema should have parallel treatment to the theatre; there should, in other words, be no prior restraint and films which are challenged should be able to fight for their rights before a jury in open court.'

Apart from the rebuke to the BBFC, this statement by the General Secretary of the Cinema Exhibitors Association, Robert Camplin, throws a rare light on the relationship between the film industry and film censorship. The CEA had been the main proponent and supporter of the BBFC at its birth and in its infancy. Now, in a forecast of the industry's attitude to the video scare seven years later, a trade magazine replied to Camplin's remarks in the same terms that the CEA itself had used at the 1917 Commission on Cinema when it wanted to outlaw independent distributors. 'Perhaps,' the editorial suggested, 'it is not unkind to conclude that there is a breed of exhibitor who would be



This still from *In the Realm of the Senses* (1976) has been censored in the same way that the scene was in the film that was shown within Britain.

'The central character in *The Exorcist* [1973],' Ferman explains, 'is a twelve-year-old girl, and because she is possessed and this voice is coming out of her saying these outrageous obscenities we had to bear in mind the "suitability" test. Also we had to ask ourselves, 'If this film is seen by any under-age kids, would it be so terrifying that it would seriously disturb them?'

The answer is presumably yes; because Warners, the distributors of *The Exorcist* have repeatedly asked Ferman for a video certificate. But before a video – or a film – can even be considered for classification it has to gain permission from the Board to be submitted. Although this particular film was never deemed by the DPP to be a 'video nasty', Warners tactfully delayed their video submission to the Board until the publicity surrounding the Video Recordings Act had died down. The patience of the distributors held up until 1988, presumably because they did not want to release a cut version of the movie. By the spring of that year, however, they had prepared all the attendant publicity for an imminent release of their biggest-selling title. At the last minute, though, Ferman scuppered that plan by citing recent cases of child abuse, and a year later in 1989, reports of satanic child abuse provided an even more appropriate excuse.

Setting aside the censor's perennial habit of coupling films to successive social problems, the censorship of *The Exorcist* highlights the constant likelihood

Passed in every country to which it has been submitted, *The Exorcist* (1973) is banned on video in Britain.

