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ISSN 1748-944X

Local Authorities and film censorship: a historical account of the 'Naughty Pictures Committees' in Sale and Manchester

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Abstract

The history of film censorship in the United Kingdom has been well covered at national level, and several authoritative accounts published. However less attention has been paid to the bodies who still have the final say, the local licensing authorities, and there has been little analysis of their own records. This study looks at primary sources in two councils that were active censors during

the 1950s and 1960s. It shows how councils such as Manchester were at the forefront of the move towards more liberal censorship of films in those decades, and were ahead of the British Board of Film Censors in their approach to film in areas such as educational films, depiction of nudity and "adult" story-lines and language. Other councils like Sale, just to the south of Manchester, attempted to 'hold back the tide' of X-films and the BBFC had to steer a course between these opposing tendencies as well as taking account of public and political opinion.

As well as shedding new light on the local licensing process at the time, the study reveals some discrepancies in a standard reference. This research was originally carried out in 2002 for an Open University project and thus pre-dates the Licensing Act 2003.

Keywords

Censorship, film, cinema, licensing, local authorities, BBFC

Introduction

The development of film censorship up to the 1950s is described in detail in a number of 1 secondary works, notably *What the Censor Saw* (1973a, pp.23-55) the memoirs of John Trevelyan, former Secretary of the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC), and *Film Censorship* by Guy Phelps (1975a, pp.26-51). Both of these pay substantial attention to local authorities, in particular Phelps' chapter on 'Statutory Powers' examines the phenomenon (1975b, pp.161-194). Geoffrey Robertson QC's *Obscenity: An Account of Censorship Laws and their Enforcement in England and Wales* (1979a) is, as one expects from Robertson, an authoritative yet readable legal textbook with an excellent section on 'the Cinema' (pp.257-269). Further works are cited below and listed in the *Bibliography*, but none of these examine in detail the activity at a local level and this article begins to fill that gap.

In terms of the origin of film censorship in England and Wales, public concern over the fire risk of highly-inflammable film led to the introduction in 1909 of the *Cinematograph Act*, which meant that every cinema had to be licensed by its county council 'on such terms and conditions and under such restrictions as ... the council may by the respective licenses determine' (Robertson 1979b, p.258). However, Tom Dewe Mathews' concludes, 'under the cloak of public safety, censorship would be smuggled in' (1994, p.8), and the film industry 'took fright at the prospect that distribution might be subjected to the whims of the different local councils' (Robertson 1979c, p.259) so, in 1912, it set up the British Board of Film Censors. It took some years, and court cases, for the BBFC to become a firmly established part of local censorship but by 1924 the model condition that:

'no cinematograph film ... which has not been passed for ... exhibition by the BBFC shall be exhibited without the express consent of the council'

received judicial approval (Robertson 1979d, pp.259-60). Many councils nonetheless retained the right to vet BBFC-certificated films, particularly after the introduction of the 'X' category in 1951, and also to give local certificates to films the BBFC had rejected. The *Cinematograph Act 1952* was a comprehensive overhaul of the earlier provisions, but its main practical effect was to exempt private and free cinemas from licensing control (Robertson 1979e, pp.260-1).

Scope of this study

This study investigates how local authority film committees were constituted and the sort of people who served on them; the kind of decisions they made and the basis for them; their reasons for continuing to censor some films rather than accepting the verdict of the BBFC, and the relationships between these Local Authorities (LA), the BBFC and the cinema industry. It also draws conclusions on the extent to which the continuing exercise of local censorship influenced the BBFC's policies in the 1950s and 60s in particular.

Sources and methods

Many county councils delegated their cinema licensing powers to district councils so there were many hundreds of local authorities in the UK exercising some censorship at least. It would have been impractical to research them all, or even a large sample within the confines of this study. Accordingly it focuses on two councils, Manchester City and Sale Borough, which had active, but markedly different, approaches to censorship during this period.

Both written and oral primary sources were used. The written sources were the archives of Manchester City Council, the Manchester Police Museum, the Trafford Local Studies Unit (for Sale Council, which was incorporated into Trafford as part of local government reorganisation in 1974) and the British Board of Film Classification (which had been since its foundation in 1912, throughout the period of this study, and until 1984 the "British Board of Film Censors"). Due to the large number of documents even for just two councils, three periods within the two decades were studied. In principle the periods were the beginning of the 1950s, the 'New Wave' years and the late 1960s. However, missing files and variations in indexing meant the eventual choice depended more on what was available (a list of files examined is included in the *References* section below). The BBFC files are archived by film title, and the local council documents revealed about 25 films whose files it would have been interesting to see. Only six were in the London office of the BBFC and the cost of transferring the remainder from their off-site repository was prohibitive. However these six (also listed in *References*) proved very illuminating of the local-national relationship and were quite sufficient for this study.

Oral history interviews were carried out with the following:

1. Tony Fishwick: a former projectionist at the *Odeon* in Sale, from 1956-1966, who regularly organised screenings for councillors.
2. Eric McPherson, a member of the Sale cinemas committee from 1971-74 (while outside the period studied he provided information about other members who had been on the committee for many years).
3. Betty Gallimore, daughter of George Russell (deceased), a leading member of Sale council and the Cinemas Committee in the late 1960s.

4. Ann Mee, whose late husband Richard was also a member of the Sale cinemas committee in the late 1960s.
5. Ken Franklin, a Manchester City councillor from 1958-1967.

The preponderance of Sale people was not deliberate. Few of the people involved in either council at the time are still alive, and by chance most of those were from Sale rather than Manchester. As there was more printed material for Manchester, this imbalance in oral evidence was not a major problem. While caution is needed in using memories of events around half a century past, facts such as obscure film titles mentioned by the interviewees were checked and proved reassuringly accurate. Where reference is made to these interviews, the relevant extracts have been collated into a supplementary document which is available on request (details in the *References* section); such references are indicated in the form, for example, "Gallimore [a]".

Licensing committee structures in Manchester & Sale

Manchester City Council had a **Watch Committee**, which by 1950 had long been overseeing the police force and licensing matters. Decisions on films were made by aldermen and councillors, and administered by Manchester Police who attended trade screenings, corresponded with the BBFC, approved film publicity and arranged previews. Watch Committee decisions had to be ratified by the full Council.

Phelps' assertion (1975c, p.161) that this system was 'abandoned' in 1953 is incorrect. The Manchester Watch Committee (MWC) minutes for the whole of 1953 (MWC vols. 86 & 87) were examined and there is no evidence that the arrangements changed in any way that year, and indeed the minutes for 1959-60 (vols 93 & 94) show the process was the same as in 1950-52 (vols 83 & 84). In 1965 the licensing responsibilities were transferred to the new **Licensing and Fire Brigades Committee** but the police still did the administration and the process was unaltered (while the Watch Committee continued in existence, overseeing other police matters). The Council was for most of this period controlled by Labour, who won it from the Tories in 1953 and then lost it back in the anti-national government landslide of 1967, the Conservatives holding it until 1970 (Waudby 1997).

Sale Borough Council (SBC) was overwhelmingly Conservative throughout this period. It had its cinema licensing powers delegated from the statutory body, Cheshire County Council, and vested them in the **General Purposes Committee**, which in turn delegated them to the **General Purposes (Cinemas) Sub-committee**. This was the situation in 1959, the first minutes available to this study. But it was more popularly known as the **Naughty Pictures Committee** (Riley [a]), or in less polite company, the **Dirty Pictures Committee** (Mee [a]). In 1967 it became a full committee of the council with the formal title of **Special (Cinemas) Committee**, though the colloquial names persisted. Eric McPherson [a] says 'it wasn't regarded as important' in fact 'it was quite a joke really with other councillors, you know 'here they are again, watching dirty films on a Thursday morning''. On the other hand those who served on it, like George Russell, took it seriously, at least according to his daughter Betty Gallimore [a].

The precise constitution of this committee and sub-committee are not recorded in the surviving council archives. Fishwick [a], recalling the mid-1950s to mid-1960s, believes all 'X' films were previewed by Sale council. But by the late 1960s most were passed by the chairman on the basis of a synopsis, presumably because by that time there were too many for the Committee to view, of the order of 50 to 100 a year (SBC 1968 pp.51-52 and SBC 1968/9 pp.801-2 and 893). They would not, however, ban a film without viewing it first. Minutes of decisions were reported to the full council but did not need ratification. The police were not involved in Sale.

Censorship viewing arrangements

Councillors viewed films at the cinemas that wanted to show them, which in Sale meant the *Odeon*, the *Savoy* or the *Warwick* (until it closed in the 60s). Fishwick [b] says this meant

getting hold of a film weeks ahead of its rota, sometimes requiring a print to be sent up from a London cinema overnight and returned immediately afterwards for that night's programme. Viewings were normally on a Thursday and always about 10am in order to finish before the normal programme began around lunch-time (Fishwick [c]). The four or five councillors (sometimes as many as 8) would be taken to 'the best seats in the house' (Fishwick [d]) at the back of the front circle and the film shown without the usual fanfare, 'no introduction, no music or anything, just pwoosh and its on!' (McPherson [b]). When the film finished, they would stay in their seats and discuss it, and Fishwick often had to move them so the main programme could start [e]. They would then go to the cinema manager and tell him that the film was OK, or that there were some problems with it [f].

Some were simply banned outright but the biggest problem came when they wanted some material cut out. Often the distributor simply withdrew it from the Sale rota, but sometimes they would try and meet the councillors' concerns. This could get, as with *The Wages of Fear* (Henri-Georges Clouzot, 1953), rather absurd (Fishwick [g]). A French thriller about lorry-loads of nitro-glycerine, it had a scene with an explosion and some swearing. The committee wanted the obscenities removed from the subtitles and suggested simply 'don't flash those subtitles up on the screen'. Fishwick explained they were printed on the film, only to be told 'cover the lens for the second while that title is showing'. Eventually he painted over the subtitles on some 500 frames by hand. However the result was rather farcical as the paint wore away during the week so that by Thursday it was obvious to the audience that there were some words they were not being allowed to see. 13

Such viewings were a rather unsatisfactory experience for the councillors too. Gallimore recalls teasing her father, Councillor George Russell, about 'watching sex films in the morning in a cold cinema, with a half-cold cup of tea' [b] while Richard Mee's widow Ann remembers his scorn at the idea that anyone could 'feel eroticism' under such conditions [b]. It must have made it difficult for these councillors, few of whom were regular cinema-goers anyway (McPherson [a]), to assess the reaction of a full public audience to the films they watched. It might have helped if they could take partners or guests along, but that wasn't allowed (Mee [c]). 14

Manchester had over 40 cinemas compared to Sale's three (MWC/93, pp.394-5). At the start of this period, all films were shown to the trade in the city, the northern provincial centre of the cinema industry, giving the police an easy way to preview them. Indeed the council wrote into its standard licence that no film could be exhibited within seven days of its first trade showing in the city (MWC/86, p.835). If the police had doubts about a film they referred it to the Watch Committee for a decision. Normally the committee would ask for a preview, in accordance with the Town Clerk's advice that they shouldn't ban a film without seeing it first (MWC/94, p.518). The cinema which wanted to screen the film would arrange the preview in much the same way as in Sale. 15

Manchester in 1950-51

'Adults-only' films before the 'X' certificate

The introduction of the 'X' category is covered in other publications (eg Trevelyan 1973b, pp.52-53) but the significant role of local authorities in this process has been rather neglected. Up to the beginning of the Fifties, the BBFC had no 'X' classification and therefore no way of passing films (other than 'H' certificate horror films) for adults only. But local authorities did have this power and the main role of the Manchester Watch Committee was deciding whether to allow uncertificated films to be shown to adults only. A typical police report to the committee would say: 16

The film is not in any of the categories permitting the issue of a certificate by the British Board of Film Censors, and may not, therefore, be exhibited at licensed cinemas in Manchester without specific permission of the licensing authority' (MWC/84 p.281).

This was for films like *Occupe Toi D'Amelie* (Claude Autant-Lara, 1949) which the police regarded as unsuitable for children, and the committee did pass it for adults only. If the police 17

thought it unsuitable for adults as well, they would say simply

'the film has not been granted a certificate by the British Board of Film Censors'

as in the case of *Manon* (Henri-Georges Clouzot, 1949), which the committee duly refused (MWC/84 p.185).

Local authority decisions of this sort led the way for the 'X' certificate on January 1st 1951, 18 though the BBFC missed one important lesson. Councils such as Manchester had chosen 18 as the age of admission to adults-only films, but the BBFC kept the age, 16, that applied to the 'H' category it replaced. Trevelyan admits this was a mistake, one not remedied for another eighteen years (1973c, p.53). It meant that even after the creation of the 'X' category, Manchester sometimes passed a film for exhibition only to persons of 18 and over (for example the 'child-birth' films, below). Many of the arguments over 'X' films, in both Manchester and Sale, were over the effects on 'young people' rather than adults, implying the age qualification was the problem (see for example the debate about the risk of 'rock and roll' films encouraging disorder among teenagers, in the section 'Sale in 1959-60' below). Indeed the BBFC's own files show the same concern, as in the case of *The Wild One* (László Benedek, 1954) whose rejection they said was because 'with the minimum age of the 'X' certificate at 16 we have no means of excluding the 16 to 20 age groups from this kind of film' (BBFC 1954/*The Wild One*, letter from Trevelyan to Columbia Pictures 26/8/59).

Political censorship

There was a most intriguing and rare incident in 1950, which gives a hint of the political 19 networks operating at the time. In April the Town Clerk received a letter from the Home Office:

'intimating that the High Commissioner for Ceylon had made representations that any public showing in this country of the cinematograph film 'the Bride of Buddha' would be gravely offensive to the Buddhist community throughout the Commonwealth.' (MWC/84, p.102)

It had been passed by Manchester the previous year 'as if it had been awarded an 'A' 20 certificate by the British Board of Film Censors' (a common formulation). There is no indication as to what the High Commissioner of Ceylon objected to in a film that the maker described as 'of a documentary and instructional point of view' but the Committee duly rescinded its permission.

Manchester in 1958-60

The 'naturist' films

By the late 50s, most debates were about 'X' (and occasionally 'A') films, referred by the 21 police as previously and almost invariably resulting in a viewing. One of the forms that attracted their attention was that of the the naturist films which had evolved as a way of getting mild nudity onto the screen in an almost asexual setting. In October 1958 the Watch Committee considered *Back to Nature* (director unknown, 1958), the first naturist film passed by the BBFC and moreover given an 'A' certificate. The Chief Constable's report described it as:

'similar to the uncertificated feature films Garden of Eden, Isle of Levant and Elysia, which were viewed by the Watch Committee during the past two years and passed for general exhibition in Manchester subject to conditions regarding posters, advertisements, 'still' photographs and trailers'

Such restrictions on advertising were routinely added to most Watch Committee permissions 22 throughout the 1950s and 60s (see figure 1 for some typical advertisements). He goes on to reproduce a letter from the BBFC explaining why they had passed a nudist film at last:

'one or two similar films have been rejected in recent years by the Board as unsuitable for exhibition in the cinema. However, on application by the distributors, local licensing authorities, with a few exceptions, have agreed to these films being exhibited in their areas. The Board have accordingly drawn the conclusion that similar films may now be regarded as

acceptable for public exhibition generally. The film referred to has been placed in the 'A' category as a guide to parents who may prefer that their children should not see it' (MPM/299, 16/10/58, app.42)

Incidentally this puts a different slant on Trevelyan's rather foreshortened account (1975d, 23 p.95) in which he says the Board first rejected *Garden of Eden* in 1953, then changed their rules on nudity after a number of local authorities passed it. The BBFC's own letter to Manchester (above) reveals that another five years passed, during which they rejected at least three more naturist films, before this change of policy.

Figure 1 - Examples of cinema advertising of 'X' and uncertificated films in the Manchester area during the 1950s and 1960s (courtesy of Manchester Libraries, Information and Archives, Manchester City Council).

Essoldo (DOMINION)
REGENT BRIDGE, SALFORD, L.
Phone: 51.A. 6936.

SUNDAY, MAY 25, FOR ONE DAY ONLY:
COVER UP 9 with WILLIAM BENDIX, DENNIS O'KEEFE
and BARBARA BRITTON. Also
JOE PALOOKA IN THE BIG FIGHT 9 with LEON ERROLL
and JOE KIRKWOOD. Judge

MONDAY, MAY 26th, FOR SIX DAYS:
Showing by Special Permission

Murder Hat
reveals
drug
murder

Strictly Adults Only

THE TRUTH BEHIND THE HEADLINES
Starting exposure of a Social Evil

Drug
murder

The Marijuana
Menace

REVEALED BY
THE GIRL WHO KNOWS

LILA LEEDS in

**"The Devil's
Weed"**

A WARNING TO THE FUTURE
A CLEAN WARNING! (SEE
ADVERT TO MURDER)

Also THE BLACK WIDOW 9 featuring CHRISTINE NORDEN
NO ONE UNDER 16 YEARS OF AGE WILL BE ADMITTED

★ **STUDIO 2**

A NEW LUXURY CINEMA IN MINIATURE
Offering a whole NEW concept of
adult entertainment in intimate surroundings.

STARTS THURSDAY OCTOBER 15th

THE SEX
ARTIST

THE FETTERED
EUROPEAN
STRIP-TEASE

NO DISCOUNT ON TICKETS
PLEASE PAY IN ADVANCE!

SUN 3.10 - 7.30 - 7.50
WEDNES 2.00 - 4.15 - 8.15 - 8.50

SUN 4.30 - 6.30
WEDNES 3.15 - 5.15 - 7.15

STAR SATURDAY CLUB
every Saturday at 10 a.m.

CINEPHONE MARKET ST.
DEA 4771

CAN YOU IGNORE...
**THE SINS OF
YOUTH**

SENSATIONAL X
FACTS
DOUBLE
PROGRAMME

THE FIRST
TRUE
STORY
NATURIST
FILM!

**TRAVELLING
LIGHT**

Presented by
GAIL AND INTERNATIONAL CO. BATHING COLOUR

ESSOLDO, Pendleton

Sunday, January 21 — For Seven Days
Sunday at 2.10, 4.50, 7.40 — Monday to Saturday 5.40, 8.35

SHELAGH DELANEY'S
A WOODFALL FILM
**A TASTE
OF HONEY** X

Starring
DORA BRYAN ROBERT STEPHENS
MURRAY MELVIN PAUL DANOUAH
and introducing RITA TUSHINGHAM

ALSO
'DANGEROUS AFTERNOON'

Sunday 3.10, 6.30 — Monday to Saturday 7.20
Children's Matinee, Saturday at 2.00 — All Comedy & Cartoon programme

The 'Childbirth' films

The censors, nationally and locally, also had problems with childbirth scenes in films with a 24 moral or educational purpose. This was at a time when fathers were rarely at the birth of

their children, even at home, and few people ever saw pictures of a baby being born. Trevelyan (1973e, p.119) reports that *Birth of a Baby* (Al Christie, 1938) was rejected by the Board in 1939, though Manchester approved it for 'separate showings for men and women'. In 1951 Manchester's Watch Committee met three times, viewed *We Want a Child* (Lau Lauritzen Jr/Alice O'F redericks, 1949) three times, and changed its mind three times, before finally deciding to pass it for adults of 18-plus only (MWC/84, pp.754,777-9,905). A spate of similar films appeared in the late 1950s, including *Birth Without Fear* (MWC/93 p.1142), *The Case of Dr Laurent* (MWC/93 pp.164 & 244) and *Pleasures are Paid For* (MPM/307, p.222). Another entitled *The Most Wonderful Moment* (Luciano Emmer, 1957) was an Italian 'clinical-cum-romantic melodrama' which explained 'the principle of painless childbirth through controlled breathing' (MWC/93, p.1142). By now the BBFC was passing such films with an 'X' certificate and Manchester agreed but always with the rider that:

'a qualified nurse or other person authorised by the Medical Officer of Health shall be in attendance at all theatres where the film is being shown in order to deal with any questions which might arise' (ibid)

The nurse might also have dealt with people fainting. Fishwick [h] vividly remembers a film 25 screened in Sale called *the Joker is Wild* (Charles Vidor, 1957) which includes a scene where a man slashes his wrists. The Sale councillors were very concerned about this, but cutting the scene would have made nonsense of the rest of the film. So they had the St John Ambulance in for every showing that week, and he says 'about 30 or 40 people fainted every night' (if that sounds an improbable figure, it should be noted that it was out of a typical full-house of about 2,000, and also that his recollections proved surprisingly accurate where they could be checked).

Other 'X' films in 1958-60

Other concerns were 'X'-certificated films like *Call Girls* (director & year unknown), a Danish 26 film with 'decidedly frank sex angles' and *Stakeout on Dope Street* (Irvin Kershner, 1958) about 'three youths who, having accidentally come into possession of a quantity of heroin, try to sell it' (MWC/96, pp.96, 140, 192). Manchester allowed these but banned another called *The Savage Eye* (Ben Maddow/Sidney Meyers/Joseph Strick, 1960), which had a 'scene dealing with 'faith-healing' [which] might give offence to people of certain religious beliefs' (MWC/94 pp.828, 851). Usually it was a straight yes or no to 'X' films, but occasionally they requested specific cuts. The police report on *Girls Disappear* (Edouard Molinaro, 1959) included lurid quotes from 'one of the regular cinema trade periodicals' which described it as 'a breathless round of mayhem, rape and murder ... the average 'X' certificate is 'church hall' by comparison' (MWC/94, p.532). The initial motion in the committee was that the film 'be not allowed', but this was amended to the deletion of scenes showing 'chewing gum being used to prevent a man from seeing another who is attacking him ... a woman being thrashed ... women with their breasts uncovered [and] a naked woman on a bed'. The amended motion was passed, indicating very clearly where the committee drew the line (MWC/94, pp.545-6).

Uncertificated films in 1958-60

The other major concern of the Watch Committee at this time was films rejected by the BBFC, 27 even as 'X's. These were frequently submitted by the maker or distributor to Manchester, often with a note saying it had already been passed by the London County Council (Manchester was usually their next port of call and sometimes the first). The Chief Constable would then write to the BBFC asking for any information about the Board's rejection. All this was then reported to the Watch Committee and, almost invariably, the councillors would agree to view the film. See figure 2 for a typical report.

Figure 2 - Typical police report to the Watch Committee at the end of the 1950s, in this case one of the "childbirth" films *The Most Wonderful Moment* (courtesy of Manchester Libraries, Information and Archives, Manchester City Council)

99 204
643

APPENDIX 62

h30 (MWC1142)

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CHIEF CONSTABLE'S REPORT:

SUBJECT: CINEMATOGRAPH FILM "THE MOST WONDERFUL MOMENT."

The Chief Constable reports that the film "The Most Wonderful Moment" was trade shown in Manchester on the 28th August, 1959. It has a running time of 90 minutes and has been granted an 'X' certificate by the British Board of Film Censors.

The film, which is a clinical-cum-romantic melodrama, explains the principles of painless childbirth through controlled breathing and includes the actual birth of a baby. The subject has been handled with discretion and there is no suggestion of unpleasantness or sordidness. The film is Italian, with English sub-titles.

The Committee viewed a similar clinical documentary film featurette "Birth Without Fear" on the 12th July, 1957, and it was resolved to allow the film for public exhibition in Manchester in accordance with the 'X' certificate awarded to it by the British Board of Film Censors, but subject to the following conditions:-

1. The inclusion of other films in the same programme as the film "Birth Without Fear" shall be subject to the prior approval of the Chief Constable.
2. No advertising matter, illustrative or otherwise, in connection with the film shall, unless previously submitted to and approved by the Chief Constable and the Medical Officer of Health, be exhibited at any premises in the City where the film is to be or is being shown or shall be displayed in any other place.
3. A qualified nurse or other person authorised by the Medical Officer of Health shall be in attendance at all theatres where the film is being shown in order to deal with any questions which might arise.

The Committee are asked whether they wish to view the film "The Most Wonderful Moment" or impose any special conditions in respect of its exhibition.

John A. McKay,
Chief Constable.
10th September, 1959.

Stripping films like *Soho Striptease* (director and year unknown) didn't get past either the 28 BBFC or Manchester (MWC/94, pp.170, 264, 271) though a graphic depiction of bullfighting *Torero* (Carlos Velo, 1957), was allowed by the city (MWC/93, p.446-7). Its Watch Committee also had to confront the issue of homosexuality. *The Third Sex* (Veit Harlan, 1957), a 'German sex melodrama' was rejected by the BBFC as 'crude and trivial' and Manchester concurred, though there was minority support for allowing it to 18's and over (MWC/93, pp.644,648). When Manchester passed uncertificated films it was usually for 18-plus only (despite the 'X' age then being 16). In contrast, a couple of months later it passed *The Time of Desire* (Egil Holmsen, 1957), a Swedish film about a lesbian relationship between two sisters 'as if the film had been awarded an 'X' certificate by the BBFC' (MWC/93, pp.881, 967).

Fear of libel

A film called *Diary for Anne* (director & year unknown) put the censors into an unusual 29 quandary. This was a 20-minute East German documentary about the 'individuals responsible for the deportation of Frank and other Jewish citizens' (MWC/93, p.1141) as depicted in the much better known *Diary of Anne Frank* (George Stephens, 1959). The BBFC had a long-standing policy of rejecting 'films which show material which might be held to be defamatory to living persons' (*ibid*), because it was 'concerned about our own position in any legal battle

about films' (BBFC 1959, 'Note from Examiners', F N Crofts 13/8/59). The Board explained its general policy to Manchester but failed to spell out the risk of being sued for libel if they allowed it. There is no indication the Watch Committee even recognised this fear. Only the BBFC's own file reveals it. Their concern was such that they asked the Foreign Office for information about the Germans named in the film, and the F.O. supplied it (BBFC 1959, F N Crofts 7/8/59). However Trevelyan concedes in his memoirs (1973f, p.175) that this policy, which had also applied to earlier films about alleged Nazis and made them appear to be shielding war criminals (BBFC 1959, news cuttings, various), was a mistake. He writes that it was eventually abandoned after their legal adviser Arnold (later Lord) Goodman said the Board should not 'do the work of the Courts' and that in any case it was 'most unlikely that the Board would be involved in any legal proceedings'. In any event Manchester allowed the film and was not sued.

Sale in 1959-60

The minutes for Sale are less detailed than those for Manchester but there is some useful 30 information to add to the oral evidence. In February 1959 the Cinemas Sub-Committee reported that members had 'in accordance with their powers to act' previewed a number of 'X' films, three of which were approved and two refused. So they had delegated powers to approve or refuse the screening of films (SBC 1958/59, p.698). *Room at the Top* (Jack Clayton, 1959) apparently gave them no problem, although they subsequently received a letter from a resident saying the council should ban such 'thoroughly immoral' films in future (SBC 1959, p.115). Such letters must have had an effect on their decision-making, particularly as no letters demanding a more liberal policy were recorded.

In March the sub-committee, then the Council, debated whether to stop previewing all 'X' 31 films, whilst still vetting selected ones. This modest proposal was prompted by a major distributor and endorsed by Alderman Cunliffe, no young radical (McPherson [c]), who opined that sub-committee previews 'only served to give added publicity to such films'. But it was defeated because of:

'the desirability of protecting young people from certain types of film ... Sale should continue to take the lead in banning films which were of an unduly horrific nature or had an undesirable sex theme or which were of such a nature that they might lead to disorder'.

(SBC 1958/59 pp.805-6).

As noted earlier, their concern was not for adults but for 'young people' who could still see 'X' 32 films at 16. They had a particular fear of 'disorder' as Fishwick [i] recalls in the context of the 'rock and roll' films, like *Rock Around the Clock* (Fred F Sears, 1956). It worried the BBFC also. Their bulky file on *The Wild One* (László Benedek, 1954), which went uncertificated from 1954 until 1967, contains Examiner's Reports which are about press coverage of hooliganism (BBFC 1954, eg Note From Examiners, N K Branch, 13/9/57), along with press-cuttings about Teddy Boys, scooter gangs and 'Wild One' court cases (see figure 3) .

Figure 3 - Press-cuttings from the BBFC file on *The Wild One* during the years when it was refused a certificate (courtesy the British Board of Film Classification, London)



Sale in the latter half of the 1960s

By the second half of the 1960s the atmosphere was becoming more liberal (McPherson [d], 33 Fishwick [j] and Mee [d]). Sale continued to check all 'X' films, though no longer viewing them all, a commitment that would have required at least a viewing a week (SBC 1968, pp.50-52).

A decision to allow *Oscar* (Edouard Molinaro, 1967) is recorded as 'in accordance with the 34 Sub-Committee's power to act', showing it retained the delegated powers it had in 1959-60 (SBC 1966, p.40). During 1967 the Sub-Committee gained independence from the General Purposes Committee, becoming the 'Special (Cinemas) Committee' with the same powers and membership. The greater number of 'X' films on release was criticised by one member who:

'inquired as to whether any steps could be taken to prevent 'X' certificate films from being shown in consecutive weeks but in reply the Town Clerk indicated that it was difficult for the licensees to arrange this as the availability of films was decided upon by the film distributors' (SBC 1967, p.551).

In June 1968 the Committee reported it had allowed 56 'X' films, and banned only one, in the 35 previous year (SBC 1968, pp.50-52); those passed included such well-known ones as *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967) and *Here We go round the Mulberry Bush* (Clive Donner, 1967) along with some rather lurid (and forgotten) titles such as *Seduced in Sodom* (Menahem Golan, 1966) and *Kinky Darlings* (Renzo Russo, 1964). Subsequent years showed similar patterns, with most 'X' films being allowed. However the concern about the numbers

of such films showing at the local cinemas (only two by now) re-surfaced in full Council in March 1969 when the Committee Vice-Chairman:

'indicated that whilst the Committee were in no way opposed to 'X' certificate films, as evidenced by the fact that they had approved 47 out of a total of 50 during the past six months, they were of the opinion that there was a lack of films suitable for family entertainment and it was necessary on occasion to travel a considerable distance to see anything but an 'X' film.'

The Council resolved to write to the two major film distributors and the BBFC (SBC 1968-69, 36 pp.893-4). There is no indication of any correspondence between Sale and the BBFC before that, and Phelps (1975d, p.166) didn't know that any authorities were still banning 'X' films in the late 1960s. Their disapproval must have therefore come as a surprise to Trevelyan, and may well have been the spur for his personal visit to Sale in 1970 or 1971 (date uncertain, McPherson [e]).

Manchester in the latter half of the Sixties

In 1965 the new Licensing and Fire Brigade Committee took over cinema licensing from the Watch Committee. It was an administrative change and the censorial process carried on much as before with much the same people (LFBC/1 p.1). They still turned down 'X' films (such as *The Wild One*) occasionally, but now most of their work was uncertificated films. Intriguingly there is evidence that Trevelyan encouraged this. In the BBFC file about another striptease film *Carousella* (John Irvin, 1965) his rejection letter to Mithras Films has a hand-written note from Trevelyan, dated the following day, saying 'discussed with Mr Maurice Hatton of Mithras Films. I said that he could **try the L.C.Cor** appeal' (BBFC 1965, emphasis added, see also figure 4).

Figure 4 - Rejection letter to Mithras films from the BBFC file on *Carousella*, showing hand-written note "I said that he could try the L.C.C. or appeal" (courtesy the British Board of Film Classification, London)

Discussed with Mr. [unclear] Halton
of [unclear] films - I said that he
could try the L.C.C. on appeal. Failing that
they might try re-editing. but it would be
difficult to do this in a way that would
get rid of our objection.
J.T./CRM 29/1/65

28th January, 1965

Mithras Films Limited,
44 Berners Street,
London, W.1.

Dear Sirs,

I write to confirm my telephone message today to Mr. Pitt Miller about your film "CAROUSELLA." I regret that this Board will not be prepared to issue a certificate for this film.

Although I appreciate that the intention of your company was to make a documentary film about the background of strip-tease, in doing so you have presented problems to this Board to which we can find no solution. The problems are as follows:-

- (1) For good reasons we have taken a strong line about the presentation of strip-tease on screen. The strip-tease acts shown in your film would not be acceptable under our present policy.
- (2) We have also taken the line that it is socially undesirable to emphasise in films (a) that strip-tease can be done by any young girl who is prepared to take her clothes off in public and (b) that girls can earn a considerable amount of money by doing it. These points are made throughout your film.

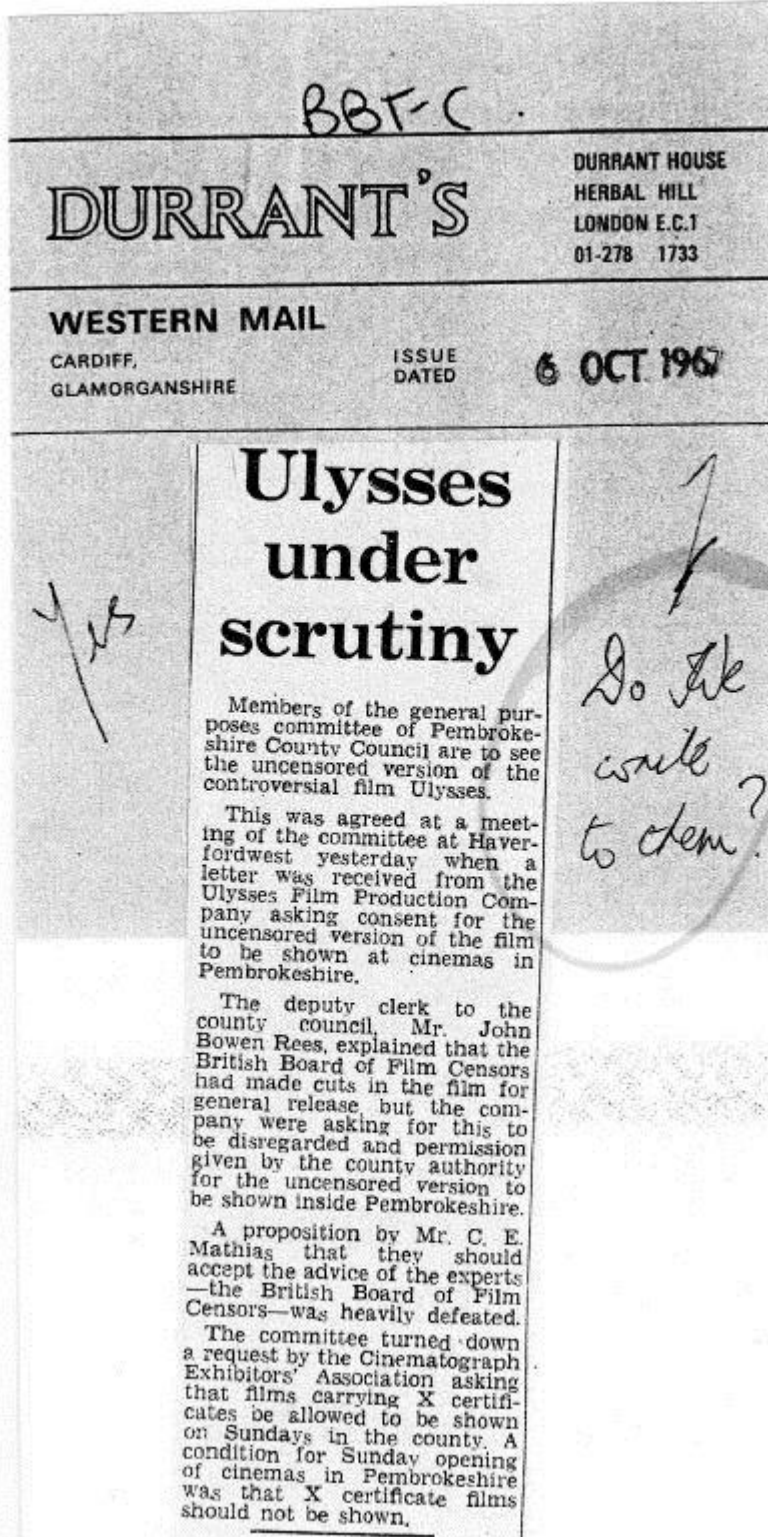
Yours faithfully,

At the new Committee's second meeting they considered a report about the film *Fanny Hill* 38 (Russ Meyer, 1964) which the BBFC said was 'completely amoral, and is both vulgar and salacious' (original underlining). The report added that both London and Middlesex had also rejected it but Birmingham had given it an 'A'. Manchester then viewed the film and agreed with Birmingham (LFBC/1, pp 124, 171, 174). The fact that some local authorities passed the film as an 'A' rankled with Trevelyan who notes (1973g, pp.110-111) that he discussed it with one councillor who didn't know what the word 'flagellation' meant and had missed the 'erection' joke. Since the latter was a school-boyish *double entendre* that would not have been out of place in a *Carry On* film, this is perhaps not surprising and, just three years later, in 1968, it was given an 'X' by the BBFC 'by which time it looked relatively mild' to Trevelyan (*ibid*). Perhaps the councillors of Manchester and Birmingham were simply, not for the first

time, a little in advance of the Board's evolving liberalism.

The saga of *Ulysses* (Joseph Strick, 1967) shows how a clever and determined film-maker 39 could exploit the local authority-BBFC relationship. When the Board's three Examiners, Secretary (Trevelyan) and President (Lord Harlech) sat down to watch the completed film they found it 'bore little relation to the script' they had vetted and a further 29 cuts were requested (BBFC 1967, memo 16/2/67). Strick took his 'X' certificate, highlighting the cuts by simply blanking the pictures and bleeping the soundtrack at each point and leaking details of the cuts to the Press, exasperating Trevelyan (LFBC/2, pp 676-7). He then approached a large number of local authorities, asking them to pass the uncut version. This created a huge pile of correspondence between the BBFC and local councils. Some wrote to the BBFC for guidance, but not all. In a surprisingly large number of cases the Board saw from local press reports (supplied by a cuttings agency) that a particular council was to consider allowing *Ulysses* uncut and wrote to it immediately, beginning 'we see from media reports ...' (BBFC 1967, eg Trevelyan to Town Clerk of Worcester, 16/11/67). A hand-written note 'do we write to them?' on one such cutting (BBFC 1967, Western Mail, 6/10/67 and figure 5) suggests the BBFC wasn't sure how some councils would react to such unsolicited letters (and this happened with other films as well). For all the fuss, the uncut *Ulysses* was given a BBFC 'X' certificate just three years later, when the age of admission was finally raised to 18.

Figure 5 - cutting from BBFC *Ulysses* file showing hand-written note "Do We write to them?" suggesting the Board wasn't sure how some councils would react to such interventions (courtesy the British Board of Film Classification, London)



The Town Hall censors

No-one directly involved in censorship in Manchester during this period is known to be still 40 alive. However Ken Franklin, who was first elected to the council in 1958, remembers Watch Committee minutes frequently being debated in full council (Franklin [a]). He believes the

motivation for trying to ban films was largely moral, arising in some cases from strong religious convictions, and not party-political at all [b]. Certainly the minutes give the impression of a steady evolution of censorship policy irrespective of political control, with no sudden change following the Tory landslide in 1967. Franklin believes age was a factor though. He was in his mid-30s when he got onto the council, and the youngest councillor on the Watch Committee at that point was in her late 40s, something he thought 'was wrong, they should have had younger people on' [c].

The best descriptions of local censors come from the Sale interviewees. George Russell only became a councillor after he retired and he was, according to his daughter 'a very upright and very moral man, certainly Conservative, and conservative with a small 'c' as well ... he wasn't a prig by any means but ... felt that it wasn't necessary to have this sort of film' (Gallimore [c]). By contrast, Ann Mee's husband was a rarity in Sale at that time, a socialist and in his 40s, which made him young by the standards of that council too. He was a teacher where most of the councillors were 'estate agents, solicitors, bank managers, accountants, I think my husband was the only teacher' (Mee [e]). Eric McPherson came onto the Cinemas Committee in 1971, just after the end of this period, but almost everyone on the committee had been there for much of the 1960s and in some cases earlier. He recalls people like Alderman Mrs Phillips who 'had a maths degree from Cambridge ... for a woman in the 1920s, extremely rare ... [she] was an ex-mayor of Sale [and] an alderman on Cheshire County Council, used to attend about 20 meetings a day, never drove, how she did it I'll never know ... she's one of these people who if you didn't have her you'd have to invent her' (McPherson [f]). Another was Councillor Ferguson, by 1971 the chairman after many years service, but in McPherson's eyes 'a small insignificant little man and I never heard him utter a sentence that was anything but mild and he was just a non-person really ... but he clearly didn't like these naughty films' [g]. McPherson felt these were people whose 'attitude clearly was that this was not the England that they knew and loved' [h]. 41

Was it Futile?

For all that Sale councillors took seriously their task of keeping 'filth' out of the borough, they recognised it was rather futile. Gallimore [d] says her father 'felt that it was a pity that neighbouring watch committees didn't work together to keep it out of the whole area, because it was so easy if Manchester agreed [to pass] something for people from Sale to go into Manchester'. Fishwick [l] says 'what was so silly about it was three or four years later we actually had films back and we've shown them, because patterns had changed. The Watch Committee didn't want to see them next time!'. 42

One of the questions that arose repeatedly, un-prompted, was whether local authorities should ever have had the right to censor films. McPherson [i] was adamant they shouldn't and in his time on the cinemas committee (1971-74) never voted to ban a BBFC-certificated film. Fishwick [m], speaking of the 1956-66 period, claims that many people thought the same then. Franklin, though less directly involved was equally opposed to local censorship [d]. 43

Limitations and suggestions for further research

This project was limited to 1950-1969 and to just two local authorities. Even within those narrow parameters it is likely that further information could be found in a larger project (for example by trawling through local newspaper files of the time). Some additional names were suggested as potential oral history subjects, but could not be followed up in the time available. Nonetheless it has added to previous publications on the subject of local authority censorship and produced evidence that their role was rather more significant than is generally recognised. 44

Conclusions

It appears that liberal councils like Manchester were frequently ahead of BBFC policy and practice throughout this period, first in having an adults-only category before the 'X' certificate (and with a more sensible age limit), then in relaxing the strictures against screen nudity (the naturist films), again in breaking down the Board's fears over libel suits (*Diary for Anne*) and finally over artistic sex and 'bad language' (*Ulysses*) in the 60s. More conservative councils like Sale continued trying to hold back the tide of 'X' films, often unknown to the BBFC. But local council policies could be quite subtle too. Manchester tended to be more liberal than the Board on matters of nudity, sex and language but less so on issues of violence and disorder, a widely-shared attitude that was summarised in the title of the book by the former chair of the GLC Films Committee Enid Wistrich (1978), *I Don't Mind the Sex, It's the Violence*. 45

Rather ironically, liberal critics wanted an end to local authority censorship coupled with a more liberal BBFC, while conservative critics wanted local authorities to work together for stricter censorship (in effect a national, less liberal censorship). At the same time, both groups could only demonstrate this through the very autonomy they enjoyed in their local licensing committees. 46

What this study has illustrated is that, in the 1950s and 1960s, film censorship in the UK was not decided solely at a national level by the British Board of Film Censors. Some local authorities, in exercising their statutory responsibility for licensing cinemas in their areas, did not simply require those cinemas to abide by BBFC certificates. Instead there were those, like Sale, that attempted to restrict the growing number of X films by banning a number of them. Others like Manchester were ahead of the national body in permitting uncertificated films of various kinds to be shown in the city, and such decisions influenced the growing liberalism of the BBFC's own censors during that period. 47

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BBFC 1967: *Ulysses*

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Franklin, Ken, Manchester City Councillor, 1958 to c.2005

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McPherson, Dr Eric, Sale Councillor and member of Cinemas Committee 1971-74 (outside the dates of this study, but knew the older members who had served in the 1960s and earlier)

Mee, Ann, widow of Councillor Richard Mee, member Sale Cinemas Committee in late 1960s

Notes on oral history references: Quotes in the text are just sufficient to illustrate the discussion, and may be abbreviated for clarity. The context can be checked by reference to the Unedited Excerpts which are available on request from the author at journo@mikehally.com. As the Harvard system is not as well suited to primary sources (particularly oral history) as it is to secondary ones, the following convention is used here.

(1) References to a specific interviewee are normally made by surname, followed by a letter in square brackets. The latter indicates the relevant paragraph in the Unedited Excerpts; for example (Fishwick [c]) refers to the third paragraph on the page headed 'Tony Fishwick'.

(2) The paragraph reference occasionally appears on its own, where it is clear who the speaker is, for example if he or she has been identified earlier in the sentence.

Filmography

Back to Nature (director & year unknown)

Birth of a Baby (Al Christie, 1938)

Birth Without Fear (director & year unknown), a.k.a Birth Without Pain

Blood of the Vampire (Henry Cass, 1958)

Bonnie and Clyde (Arthur Penn, 1967)

Bride of Buddha (Walter Futter, 1941), originally released as India Speaks (1933) a.k.a. Bride of the East

The Cage of Doom (Robert J Gurney Jr, 1958)

Call Girls (director & year unknown)

Carousella (John Irvin, 1965)

The Case of Dr Laurent (Jean Paul Le Chenois, 1957)

Diary for Anne (director & year unknown)

Diary of Anne Frank (George Stephens, 1959)

Elysia (no director, 1934)

Fanny Hill (Russ Meyer, 1964)

Garden of Eden (Max Nosseck, 1954)

Girls Disappear (Edouard Molinaro, 1959)

Girl With Green Eyes (Desmond Davis, 1964)

Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush (Clive Donner, 1967)

Isle of Levant (director unknown, 1957)

It Came from Beneath the Sea (Robert Gordon, 1955)

The Joker is Wild (Charles Vidor, 1957)

Jokers Wild (director unknown, 1969)

Kinky Darlings (Renzo Russo, 1964)

Last Tango in Paris (Bernardo Bertolucci, 1972).

Love is my Profession (Claude Autant-Lara, 1958)

Manon (Henri-Georges Clouzot, 1949)

The Most Wonderful Moment (Luciano Emmer, 1957), original title Il Momento piu Bello

Occupe Toi D'Amelie, (Claude Autant-Lara, 1949)

Oscar (Edouard Molinaro, 1967)

Pleasures are Paid For (Andre Rodriguez, 1958)

Rock around the Clock (Fred F Sears, 1956)

Room at the Top (Jack Clayton, 1958)

The Savage Eye (Ben Maddow/Sidney Meyers/Joseph Strick, 1960)

The Screaming Skull (Alex Nicol, 1958)

Seduced in Sodom (Menahem Golan, 1966)

Soho Striptease (director & year unknown)

Stakeout on Dope Street Irvin Kershner, 1958)

A Taste of Honey (Tony Richardson, 1961)

The Third Sex (Veit Harlan, 1957)

The Time of Desire (Egil Holmsen, 1957), originally titled 'Hasthandlarens flickor' (1954)

Torero (Carlos Velo, 1957)

Traffic in Souls (Robert Siodmak, 1950) originally Cargaison Blanche (1937)

Ulysses (Joseph Strick, 1967)

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