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Censorship in Cinema
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The Evil Inside: Video Nasties and the British Censor's Aversion to Horror

“H” for “Horrific,” or “H” for “Hysteria?” This is one of many questions to consider when discussing the widespread historical censorship of horror movies in Great Britain. While the notorious “H” rating (designed in the 1930’s to indicate and deter the existence of horror) was eliminated from the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC)’s vocabulary by 1951, the genre’s struggle with the censors was far from over. The biggest, bloodiest battle of the BBFC and the horror genre actually occurred in the 1980’s, with the introduction and enforcement of the Video Recordings Act of 1984 (Brooke). Under this act, over seventy horror movies, some of which had already received theatrical classifications, were pulled off the shelf and unabashedly banned. Labeled by the British media as “video nasties,” these films served as scapegoats for societal problems and were frequently prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law. In fact, some of these films have yet to be made available to British audiences in their original, uncut forms.

To understand the extreme actions of the BBFC in the 1980’s, it is helpful to examine some of the most controversial video nasties on the list, as well as the anxieties underneath them and the sensibilities they violated. Wes Craven’s *The Last House on the Left* (1972) challenges cultural divisions and political demonization with a rape/revenge fantasy that cuts too close to home, while Italy’s *Cannibal Holocaust* (1979) questions the limits of media sensationalism by traveling to the “green inferno” and depicting its extreme cruelty. On the other hand entirely, Sam Raimi’s *The Evil Dead* (1981) combines excessive violence with black comedy in a way that invites its viewers to laugh at human carnage. Although these three films are wildly different in tone and presentation

of content, they are linked by their inclusion of rape and violence and allow a breakdown of video nasties into three categories. *Last House* will represent serious, allegorical nasties, *Cannibal Holocaust* will represent ultra realistic “smut”/snuff films, and *Evil Dead* will represent the “silly”/syrupy nasties that ran rampant with outrageous red dye. Classifying video nasties into these subcategories will illuminate the aspects of horror movies that scared an entire society to the point of censorship. It will also highlight components of media that still terrify individuals and organizations all over the world today, and emphasize the true value and function of the controversial, confrontational horror genre in global society.

From the birth of the genre in the 1920’s and 30’s, the BBFC has threatened and thwarted horror films with censorship. Although it was internationally lauded, the popular German Expressionist movement struggled to gain footing in Great Britain due to its “unnecessarily distressing” scenes and characteristics (Kermode 10). The movement’s defining work, *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), was nearly banned in 1920, and two years later, the expressionist masterpiece *Nosferatu* (1922) was banned from the country altogether. In the 1930’s, with films like *Dracula* (1931) and *Frankenstein* (1931), horror movies were faced with more cuts and complaints than ever before, and by 1932, the “H” rating was introduced (Kermode 11). “H” stood for horror, and while the rating was intended to be advisory, it was often used as an excuse to ban anyone under sixteen from seeing works of a horrific nature (Brooke). Additionally, during World War II, “H” came to connote an “assumption that [horror] films were bad for the soul and would therefore undermine the collective war effort” (Kermode 11). This mindset essentially stopped the distribution of horror movies until 1951 when the “H” category was replaced with the “X” certificate. Ideally, the “X” would exclude only children, but as journalist Mark Kermode notes, “the ‘X’ certificate continued to treat adults as little more than advanced children” (Kermode 11).

Whatever their rating, scary movies were all but forbidden, and because of censorship's paternal influence over society, were associated with contempt, disgust, and even national destruction. Over the next two decades, various BBFC presidents continued to crack down on horror.

By the 1970's; however, the BBFC was under the rule of Stephen Murphy, a more liberal president who was "convinced that the repression of violence had been taken too far... that the Board's demands were tending to take the horror out of the horror film" (Phelps qtd. in Kermode 15). Murphy's ideology allowed the passing of films like *Rosemary's Baby* (1968) and *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) with "X" certificates, and even allowed for an uncut version of *The Exorcist* (1973) to be shown in theaters. Unfortunately, Murphy's reign was still responsible for the banning of *The Last House on the Left* (1972) and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974). These releases, or lack thereof, proved that sometimes "cutting would not solve the problem," and that "excellence within the horror genre was to be rewarded with disapproval and ultimately dismissal" (Kermode 16). If horror movies accomplished their goal, which was to shock and scare their audiences, they were quickly punished by the BBFC. Unsurprisingly, in the 1980's, horror movies found a way around the board, and moved into a temporary home in the unregulated video market.

While films like *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980) and *I Spit on Your Grave* (1981) found a way into the country via videotapes, their diabolical success was short lived. British tabloid newspapers and social crusaders soon took the offensive, labeling the frightening tapes as "video nasties" and presenting them as valid "threats" to society. Hysteria in both media and government ran wild, presenting exaggerated statistics and establishing the films as scapegoats for all of society's ills and evils (Kermode 17). The public demanded persecution, and as a result, the distributors of the material, known as video dealers or even "merchants of menace," were often fined and punished

under the Obscene Publications Act (OPA). Previously reserved for pornography and highly inconsistent in its regulations, the OPA had recently extended its doctrine to the prosecution of violence in movies. Without official guidelines and with the chores of court cases, however, the OPA's powers were limited, and as a result, the Video Recordings Act (VRA) was instituted in 1984. The VRA required videos to obtain classification from the BBFC before release, and over seventy films were refused classification and altogether banned, sometimes based on advertising alone. Additionally, a theatrical classification did not guarantee the BBFC's approval under the VRA, due to videos' open availability within the home. Several films like *The Exorcist* were forced to make further cuts in order to be classified for video release, or their releases were flat out refused. This 1980's list of once-banned films are still referred to as video nasties today, and include many pieces of cinema that are recognized as works of art, or milestones of the horror genre.

One such film on the video nasties list, currently commended as both a work of art and a turning point in the horror genre, is Wes Craven's *The Last House on the Left* (1972). The film depicts the brutal rape and murder of Mari Collingwood and her friend, Phyllis, by a gang of escaped convicts; as well as the gruesome revenge exacted by the Collingwood family when the criminals unwittingly take refuge in their victim's home. The film was initially rejected for theatrical release by the BBFC who found "the whole feel of the film wrong" (Murphy qtd in "Case Studies"). Although the film was described by its American distributors as having "some menacing undertones," it was filled with allegorical meaning and was also a self-described "plea for an end to all the senseless violence and inhuman cruelty that has become so much a part of the times in which we live" (Lowenstein 111). This quote from *Last House's* advertisement reveals that the film has loftier goals than exploiting sexual violence. In fact, *Last House* uses violence,

rape, razor-sharp dialogue, and the shocking combination of inhuman brutality and the domestic sphere to create a convincing allegorical tale about the American Vietnam era. The meshing of civilized with psychotic and of hippy counterculture with violence and cruelty symbolizes the dangers of political demonization, and emphasizes that evil can exist anywhere. Additionally, Craven's most obvious inspiration aside from Ingmar Bergman's *The Virgin Spring* (1960) comes from the Kent State shooting of 1970, a real-life consequence of the dangerous American discourse present during the Vietnam era. The film's most prolific still and the photo used for *Last House*'s posters and ads depicts a terrified Phyllis cornered against a boulder, and is actually a recreation of "John Filo's Pulitzer Prize-winning depiction of the tragedy [at Kent State]" (Lowenstein 114). While *Last House* appears on the surface to be about Mari Collingwood, it is at its heart more about Mary Vecchio, the subject of Filo's photo who was subsequently "raped," or demonized and destroyed by the American media and its unfair presentations of counter-culture women (Lowenstein 116). The female body and its subsequent destruction in *Last House* symbolizes the feminine vulnerability of a nation wracked by tragedy and war. Perhaps the British censors missed the point of this film because of their distance from Vietnam and American culture, but more realistically, the film was censored for *saying* too much as opposed to *showing* too much. The film depicted a national tragedy and challenged it with violence, but as Murphy pointed out, the violence was less of a problem: the film's message was so "wrong" that it could not be made acceptable by cutting.

Because of its grave tone and symbolic nature, in addition to its extensive censorship history, *Last House* is a perfect representation of the serious, allegorical category of video nasties. These are films that while violent, use their violence to say something deeper about human nature. Though they do so with shocking scenes and images, these nasties have an impressive

understanding of tone, and they force audiences to confront the darker aspects of themselves, their culture, and their society. These films are not reliant on their scenes of violence, but rather on their dark and somber messages. For further clarification, consider *The Exorcist* (1973), a film and video nasty whose “terror and disgust, like its hideously explicit and literal-minded special effects, spoke, at the time, to a larger, if unconscious, collective fear...the real birth of girl power” (Gleiberman). *The Exorcist* is not about possession, but rather about the anxieties inspired by female liberation. Although the effects were scary at the time and helped make a point, the true fear lay underneath them. Consider also *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), yet another effective, albeit terrifying fictional response to the extreme and undeniably real violence of the Vietnam conflict.

While all of the aforementioned films are now recognized as masterpieces, and are praised and written about extensively, many of them were not available uncut in the U.K. until the 2000's. *Last House*, specifically, was not made legally available to the British public in its original form until 2008. The film, while incredibly meaningful, was denied classification and prosecuted under the OPA during its brief run as an unregulated video tape (1982-84). The original film was not available until nine years after the uncut video releases of *The Exorcist* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* alike. Craven's film was stifled by significant cuts even after the theatrical release of *Saw* (2004), a film whose violence made even the most shocking scenes of *Last House* appear harmless. *Last House* is an evocative and revealing piece of cinema in its own right, but most importantly, it demonstrates the fact that the BBFC, during the video nasties scare and even into the 21st century, can be be more terrified of the message behind a film than of any act of rape or violence.

Allegory aside, there are films on the video nasty list that were truly deemed obscene because of their ultra-realistic and explicit violence. *Cannibal Holocaust* (1979) is one of these films, and is the perfect piece to represent the “smut”/snuff category of video nasties. Widely considered to be one of, if not the most controversial film of all time, *Cannibal Holocaust* and its director, Ruggero Deodato, faced charges for obscenity and even murder before the film made it out of its home country. Upon the 1980 release of *Cannibal Holocaust* in Milan, Italy; Deodato was arrested and charged with murder. The violence in the film was so realistic that the Italian authorities suspected Deodato of creating and releasing an actual snuff film¹. Deodato was to be convicted and all copies of the film burned until the actors featured in the footage appeared live and alive on Italian television (Dirks). After the controversy in Italy, the film’s distributors did not attempt to obtain classification from the BBFC. Instead, a “slightly pre-cut” version of the film was slipped into Britain's unregulated video market in 1982 (“Case Studies”). Unsurprisingly, *Cannibal Holocaust* was quickly ousted by the press as one of the strongest video nasties and was subsequently prosecuted under the OPA, and banned from the country under the VRA.

Of all the words that can be used to describe *Cannibal Holocaust*, subtle is not one of them. The film tells the tale of a failed rescue mission in the Amazon rainforest, in which a professor discovers the decimated bodies and left-behind film canisters of a documentary film crew. While the professor and his team encounter significant terror during their own journey, the true horror comes from the “found footage” and behavior of the deceased documentarians. Although Professor Monroe witnesses firsthand a shockingly awful and sexually explicit “punishment for adultery,” and even eats human flesh as part of a tribal ceremony; the Amazonian natives are not ultimately

¹ Defined by the Oxford Dictionary, a snuff film is “a pornographic movie of an actual murder.”

presented as the real “savages.” That title is reserved on behalf of Jack Anders and his faux-documentary film crew, who exploit the primitive tribe and instate a “Cannibal Holocaust” (blatantly and unashamedly based off the actual holocaust) in order to obtain more “shocking” and “sensational” footage.

In this way, the film contradicts itself and is incredibly self-reflexive. Deodato was inspired to make *Cannibal Holocaust* by violent Italian news reports that featured real and even fabricated killings and maimings (Rose). His intention behind the film was to critique shock value and sensationalism in the media; however, the film itself became a video nasty and is grouped under the “cannibal exploitation” subgenre that it undoubtedly helped invent. The director notes that at the same time the filmmakers in the movie are “shown goading, raping and even killing to get sensational footage for the media back home,” the Italian film producers were instructing Deodato to ““Do more! Do more! Keep filming! Kill more people! Don't worry, your message will come though”” (Deodato qtd. by Rose). The violence in the film, especially its sequences of authentic animal torture, ultimately undermine the message of Deodato’s movie, even though the theme is spelled out through dialogue in the latter half of the film. Additionally, the film was, and still is, recognized and marketed for its controversy, gore, and sensationalism. The best description of the film’s true nature comes from this line of dialogue: “the more you rape their senses, the happier they are!” (Deodato). While this quote helps capture the film’s message and begins to hint at the bizarre pleasures offered by the horror genre, the British censors disagree. The completely uncut version of *Cannibal Holocaust* is still not legally available in the U.K.

Cannibal Holocaust was not the first, nor was it the last, video nasty to exploit realistic violence to draw an audience or make a point. Before Deodato’s film touted the tagline, “the most controversial movie of all-time,” *Snuff* (1975), a narrative film parading as an actual snuff film,

was “the picture they said could NEVER be shown.”² After *Cannibal Holocaust* came *Cannibal Apocalypse* (1980), *Cannibal Ferox* (1981), and countless others. These fictional snuff films were widely banned, derided as “smut,” and usually failed in presenting a meaningful message, if they tried at all. Nonetheless, the cannibal exploitation subgenre has freed itself from British censorship and established itself within the horror genre at large. In fact, Eli Roth’s *The Green Inferno* (2013), named after the fictional location of *Cannibal Holocaust*, was released just this year, and fans of the horror genre ate it up (pun intended). Perhaps what disturbed the British censors about the snuff/“smut” subcategory of video nasties was not so much its existence, but rather its ability to draw people in. Because this subgenre emerged post-WWII and its founding father flaunted “Holocaust” as part of its title, it is not a stretch to suggest that this kind of horror had something to do with the world reacting to global trauma. It is only natural, after being exposed to so much uncontrollable violence, to take pleasure in the horror that feels far away, has no consequences, and most importantly, can be controlled by cinema.

Speaking of taking pleasure in horror, imagine this: the sound consists almost exclusively of screaming, blood and gore pour down by the bucket, and viewers are either “nauseated” or amused by the film’s pure excess. This is *The Evil Dead* (1981), it is a prolific video nasty, and it boasts one of the most involved censorship histories of all time. Referred to by infamous media activist, Mary Whitehouse, as the “number one nasty,” *Evil Dead* was widely controversial throughout the 1980’s and was not released on video uncut until 2001 (Whitehouse qtd in “Case Studies”). The film tells the story of Ashley “Ash” Williams; his girlfriend, Linda; and his buddies Scott, Shelly, and Cheryl as they accidentally activate an ancient curse in an isolated cabin that turns them into zombies one by one. The violence that goes hand in hand with this plotline is

² Taglines from materials found on IMDB

all but unavoidable, and ends up being overdone to the point of humor. Many viewers, even within the BBFC, found the film to be “so ridiculously 'over the top' that it could not be taken seriously,” and the film undeniably activated a new tone for the horror genre (“Case Studies”).

This new tone of horror, represented by *Evil Dead*, is the establishing force behind the “silly,” syrupy category of video nasties. These often low budget films, like *Frozen Screams* (1975) and *Hell of the Living Dead* (1980), indulged in violence and cheap gore shots to the point where they were no longer meaningful or realistic, but rather bizarrely pleasurable and even laughable. These are films that allowed audiences to take pleasure in the disgusting and even to appreciate cheesiness or “camp,” a phenomenon described by cinema expert Susan Sontag as “the good taste of bad taste” (Sontag). Although many audiences found ways to enjoy *Evil Dead*’s impressively unconvincing effects, others, like the BBFC and Mary Whitehouse, found ways to be offended by scenes as ridiculous as an assault by a tree. Unlike Krug’s rape of Mari Collingwood in *Last House* – a scene that is haunting to this day and symbolic of the “feminization” and vulnerability of a nation in crisis – Cheryl’s tree-rape scene is nearly impossible to take seriously and is as cringe worthy for its camp as it is for its sexual violence (Lowenstein 116). Additionally, the scene is presented without a political agenda and exists only to make audiences “laugh, or jump, or scream,” which is director Sam Raimi’s self-described goal as a filmmaker, or as he calls it, a “circus clown” (Raimi qtd by Sagers).

Despite the frivolous tone of *Evil Dead*, the film, like others in the syrupy nasty category, still possessed the potential to offend, apparently to the point of censorship. While *Evil Dead* was originally passed with a few cuts and an “X” certificate, it soon got swept into the video nasty hysteria of the 1980’s. As a response to public pressure, the videotape was taken off the shelves and prosecuted as obscene under the OPA. To avoid court fees, many shop owners plead guilty to

selling obscenity; however, the film's distributors did not. In a 1985 Snaresbrook Crown Court case, the distributors were able to prove that the film was not obscene. As a result, the film was officially removed from the video nasties list. Unfortunately, this was not the end of *Evil Dead's* censorship woes. The British public kept the film firmly pinned to the video nasties craze, and the videotape was denied classification under the VRA to avoid offending both the public and the lower courts that had previously found the film to be obscene. In 1989, the film was resubmitted for classification and was subjected to further cuts. In addition to the 1982 reductions to "the number of blows with an axe... the length of an eye gouging, and...the number of times that a pencil was twisted into a person's leg," the infamous tree-rape scene was significantly shortened ("Case Studies"). Even though they sound insignificant in the grand scheme of *Evil Dead's* violence, these cuts established the film as "significantly different," and won it an "18" classification. Nevertheless, the film was not available to the British people entirely uncut until 2001, even after the release of Wes Craven's equally campy and gruesome *Scream* (1996). Looking back, the required cuts to and stifling of *Evil Dead* seem as nonsensical as the film's tongue in cheek tone. So what was the BBFC afraid of? If the tone eliminated the so-called "threat" of video nasties, perhaps the true fear came from audience response. While people were being dismembered on screen, people in the audience were snickering and truly enjoying themselves. Surely, this was some sort of evil.

Today, evil has a home in movie theaters and television sets all over the globe. Horror fans are some of the most rabid in the world, and horror films find new ways to push boundaries everyday. While the BBFC still "protects" its constituents from films like *The Human Centipede II: Full Sequence* (2011) and one or two animal slaughter scenes from *Cannibal Holocaust*, the "British censors' undeclared war against horror films" is effectively over (Kermode 10). That

being said, the most terrifying aspect of the video nasties scare of the 1980's was not the nasties themselves, but rather the way an entire civilization became caught up in hysterics and stifled many of the most respected voices in horror. With WWII and its aftermath, the British people had undoubtedly been exposed to authentic and harrowing violence and horror, so it seems unfair that the paternalistic British censors kept them in the dark when it came to the horror genre. Additionally, horror is, and always has been, a way to confront and cope with global and national traumas, and some of the nasties, especially those in the vein of *Last House*, could have been a useful outlet to the British people during their turbulent postwar era. Ultimately, Britain was a nation racked by fear, and as a result, became a nation deprived of horror's unlikely pleasures. Whether it's the allegory and significance of *Last House*, the blatant and controlled exploitation of *Cannibal Holocaust*, or the camp sensibilities behind *Evil Dead*; horror offers audiences something they can't get anywhere else: an opportunity to enjoy fear from a place of safety and without the consequences of uncontrolled reality. If there are lessons to be learned from the checkered history and continuing popularity of video nasties in all categories, they are as follows:

1. Horror films are worthy of appreciation
2. No board of censors should stop an adult audience from creating and embracing their own tastes, even if they are a bit evil.

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