

THE CENSORSHIP OF FILMS ON BRITISH TELEVISION

HOW IT WORKS AND WHY IT SHOULD STOP

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villain of the piece. Edited
for four-letter words.
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★★★★

Over the past thirty years, many of the fetters of censorship have been removed from the film industry, the momentum of change having been greater during this period than at any other time during film's hundred year history. Pressure from film producers against draconian censorship has also done much for freedom of expression on television. However, within both media paradoxes exist, which result in the United Kingdom being subjected to some of the most bizarre examples of censorship in Western Europe.

This article looks at some of the idiosyncrasies in the censorship of British television. It describes the different approaches to film and to domestically produced programmes, and illustrates the need for a total abolition of the television censorship laws in Britain, and the disbanding of the government QUANGO that enforces these laws.¹

DIFFERENT POLICIES FOR DIFFERENT CHANNELS

Britain's four terrestrial channels have a remarkably diverse approach to the subject of editorial censorship. Each channel adopts the attitude that it caters for a certain subset of the population, each of which remains relatively constant in its loyalty. Both BBC2 and Channel 4 assume that their respective viewer brackets include mature adults from within the professional classes and teenagers. On the other hand, BBC1 and ITV make the judgement that they embrace the whole spectrum of viewers, including the categories already mentioned. These simplistic assumptions affect the nature and extent of censorship on each channel. The Broadcasting Standards Council (BSC), chaired by Lady Howe, thus has the difficult task of using different criteria for different channels when examining a censorship-related complaint from a viewer.

TAMING ITV

The extent to which programming on ITV is affected by 'sanitisation' is staggering. This particularly affects films imported from the United States. The most ridiculous example of this occurred in 1987. At that time, controversy about when 'adult' entertainment should begin had led to the establishment of a 9pm 'watershed', on the two popular channels (BBC1 and ITV). This wasn't imposed on the television companies by the Government; it was an act of 'good faith' by the Companies themselves.

In September 1987, ITV showed the premiere of *Romancing the Stone*² on most of the Independent Network. The film began at 8pm and finished at 10pm. At the cinema, the film was awarded a 'PG' ('parental guidance') certificate. This meant that it was judged suitable in the cinema for all but the youngest moviegoer. In spite of this, the word 'shit' was edited out of the film at every occurrence during the first hour of the film's showing on television. The effect was such that the film was punctuated with one-second periods of silence whenever the offending word was due to appear. At exactly nine o'clock the floodgates opened, so to speak, and viewers were suddenly introduced to a word that they had been previously denied in the first half of the film. The illogicality is clear. Parents were not likely to allow young children to start watching a film at 8pm, only then to call a halt at 9pm because of television's self-imposed witching hour. This was quite different from the sort of censorship that

denies a vocal TV platform to perceived Northern Irish undesirables;³ this was the result of a reluctantly self-imposed policy.

ITV no longer indulges in that particular practice. But there have been plenty of other occasions when films have been tampered with to appease a vociferous minority of complainants (even before they've complained!). Post-watershed films are not immune to stringent editing and, in some cases, are rendered so harmless that they would be suitable for pre-9pm viewing.

*Robocop*⁴ is a violent, futuristic thriller which contains violent and gory sequences, and a script of unrelenting bad language. ITV didn't censor this movie, because it never bought the original copy. Instead, it imported a 'TV version' which was completely different in nature to the original. This version didn't so much censor the film as metaphorically rape it. Every instance of violence was deleted and the script had been redrafted and reimposed on the film using foley procedures.⁵ The amended product was shown at 10pm; yet it was suitable for the whole family. The word 'fucking' was replaced throughout by 'frigging'. More amusingly, 'cocksucker' gave way to 'bloodsucker'.

Thankfully, TV versions of major cinematic films are relatively rare, but their use illustrates the contempt in which ITV holds the intelligence and maturity of its viewers. To describe a film as a 'TV premiere' from the cinema is seriously misleading. Television companies are careful to warn viewers of anything which they (the TV company) think might cause offence. *No consideration is given to any offence that will be caused as a result of qualitative amendments to a film which may alter its inherent nature.*

The irony is that much more editorial control is allowed to the producers of television programmes on ITV. Series such as *Prime Suspect*,⁶ *Inspector Morse*⁷ and *Cracker*⁸ are littered with scenes of sex and violence which would not be tolerated if they appeared in a movie. It could even be argued that these scenes are in fact more distressing than similar fare in American films as they are directed in a grittier and more realistic fashion. The scenes in British programmes seem to reflect real-life situations in a way that is less gratuitous and glamorous, yet more disturbing.

So why the discrepancy? The whole argument about ITV censorship can be boiled down to the issue of context. Violence, sex and bad language can be justified, it seems, so long as these are for a reason. Taking this argument to the extreme, it means that soft pornography would never be shown on TV (no matter how soft it is) because it is considered gratuitous. However sex that borders on the hard-core can be shown, so long as it is integral to and a necessary part of the plot.

The Germans laugh at our prudish attitude towards pornography. Their channels bombard viewers with late-night soft porn. What the Germans don't realise is that the British witness more explicit sex on prime time television.

THE BBC — PUTTING UP WITH AUNTIE'S MORALISING

BBC1, like ITV, serves a very wide segment of television's total audience. Yet it is prepared to take more censorship risks, but this doesn't mean that its attitude is particularly liberal. Some programmes have had scenes removed despite being shown post-watershed. Nevertheless, homegrown drama on BBC1 has sailed close to the wind frequently.

In November 1986, BBC1 screened Dennis Potter's landmark work, *The Singing Detective*.⁹ At the time, Michael Grade was Controller of Programmes for BBC1. Episode four of this drama featured a particularly explicit sex scene filmed in the Forest of Dean. This scene raised the hackles of Mary Whitehouse and of the *Sunday Times*, and the latter stirred up the controversy on the morning of the day that the episode in question was due to be screened. Michael Grade weighed the pros and cons of showing the scene and event-

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ually decided in favour. Unsurprisingly, it was the issue of 'context' which ensured the scene's inclusion for transmission. Needless to say, there was a great deal of publicity fallout as a result of this decision. But what is interesting to note is that in the two subsequent repeats of the series, the scene was retained, with not a murmur voiced against it.

The BBC faced a similar test of strength when the drama, *A Time to Dance*,¹⁰ was shown in January 1992. The first episode opened with a rape scene, which was shown before the 9pm watershed. This caused further controversy, and any moral victory that was won by Michael Grade against censorship in 1986 proved to be pyrrhic in 1992 when other offending scenes were removed from *A Time to Dance*. The present rule now seems to be one of trumpeting any sexual explicitness in advance to pre-empt criticism.¹¹

Bearing in mind the BBC's candour towards sex, it is amazing how much care it takes to limit the amount of violence that it shows — especially on American cop shows. The philosophy behind this seems to be that sex is part of life, whereas violence isn't. But here again 'context' plays a part. The cop show *Miami Vice*¹² was regularly censored in the 1980s despite being relatively harmless entertainment. Hard-hitting home-grown dramas, such as *Threads*,¹³ *The Monocled Mutineer*¹⁴ and *Tumbledown*,¹⁵ remained untouched despite containing scenes that were deeply disturbing.

The BBC occasionally indulges in the practice of showing 'TV version' films, to enable the film to be shown during family viewing hours. This policy is particularly ridiculous when the film has received a PG-rating in the cinema. All three Indiana Jones films have been censored when shown on BBC1. *Raiders of the Lost Ark*¹⁶ is considered so violent by the BBC that they never show it before about 8pm, and only then with some adjustments. To their credit, the BBC tend not to censor adult films shown after the watershed.

BBC2

BBC2 follows completely different censorship guidelines. Films of a more intellectual or artistic quality are shown on the channel. BBC2 therefore concludes that the audience who watch such films are more able to make informed decisions about them. The consequence of this is that films shown on BBC2 are rarely, if ever, censored.

Nor does BBC2 appear to have a total exclusion policy. Any film that has been 18-rated for the cinema is considered proper for BBC2 to show. This is a rather amazing state of affairs, as it is just as simple for a child to switch the television on to BBC2 at, say, 10pm as it is for him to switch it on to BBC1 or ITV.

The selection of films appearing on BBC2 in recent times has been remarkable in testing the limits of television censorship. David Lynch's surreal *Blue Velvet*¹⁷ appeared in January 1993. This film contains scenes of graphic and perverse violence,¹⁸ yet it appeared on BBC2 without comment. Had it been shown on BBC1 there would have been uproar.

BBC2 allows British drama to be shown which couldn't be broadcast on BBC1. Despite BBC1's relatively relaxed attitude towards sex and violence in home-grown drama, there are some works that would overstep the mark if shown on BBC's main terrestrial channel. These appear on BBC2, but not necessarily without controversy. Hanif Kureishi's *Buddha of Suburbia* caused an outcry when it appeared on BBC2 in November 1993. One of the episodes featured a protracted scene of group sex, which wasn't particularly explicit but which was nevertheless ground breaking by television standards.

CHANNEL 4 — FLYING THE FLAG FOR FREEDOM

Of all the channels, only Channel 4 stands defiant against the march of censorship. Since its inception, Channel 4 has made freedom of expression one of its tenets. Fiercely independent, it has sought to make original drama and to show art-house films without fear of reprisal from the forces of censorship. It has succeeded up to a point.

Channel 4's first major brush with authority came in 1986 when it showed a series of films known unofficially as the "Red Triangle" series. These were all 18-rated films which would previously have not been shown on television due to their explicit content. A red triangle in the left-hand corner of the screen literally signposted the film throughout its duration. The idea was that this would deter those easily offended from watching. Inevitably it had the opposite effect and the series became something of a cult. Mary Whitehouse of the National Viewers and Listeners Association was appalled, and she lobbied MPs. The result was that a Home Affairs Parliamentary

Committee sat speechless while watching these films as part of a hearing on the matter. They were said to be appalled by graphic scenes of buggery in one of these films. (I bet.) One of the films included was *Pixote*,¹⁹ a violent and harrowing study of child poverty in Brazil, and certainly not a film one would watch for titillation. The Red Triangle series was never reprised after that controversy, but this doesn't mean that Channel 4 no longer refuses to show films of a sensitive nature. It is just that it doesn't signpost them any more. Controversial films such as *Jubilee*²⁰ and *Betty Blue*²¹ have been shown, but without the accompanying moralising fuss.

Channel 4 has a very relaxed attitude towards British drama. One point worthy of note is that Dennis Potter chose to have his drama series *Lipstick on Your Collar* produced on Channel 4. When he worked for the BBC, much of Potter's work was shown on BBC1. Once he had switched to the Independent sector, he must have realised that Channel 4, rather than ITV, would be a better bet for his rather off-beat dramas.

WHAT OF THE FUTURE?

There may come a time when the Government refrains from any regulation of the existing terrestrial television channels. At the moment, only satellite TV enjoys this kind of freedom. The Government's renewal of the BBC's charter beyond 1996²² makes this prospect unlikely for the established channels in the near future. In the meantime, the Broadcasting Complaints Committee continues to listen to — and in many cases uphold — complaints made against specific programmes. Even political censorship is creeping in again,²³ as a BBC *Panorama*²⁴ programme showed when it fell victim to charges that it vilified single mothers. In the present climate, it's a lottery as to whether a film will be shown on television uncut. The more intelligent a film is, the more likely that it will appear uncut, because it will be shown on BBC2 or Channel 4. Politicians cannot avoid the pressures that come from a market that is becoming increasingly deregulated. Sooner or later they will have to amend a system which allows more explicit detail of real sexual peccadilloes through the written media than it allows the viewing public to see within a fictional context.

NOTES

1. Primarily the Broadcasting Standards Council.
2. Dir. Robert Zemeckis (1984).
3. This measure was repealed by HM Government in October 1994.
4. Dir. Paul Verhoeven (1987).
5. A technique whereby actors (not necessarily the original stars) are used to synchronise their voices with the moving image during post-production of the film.
6. (1991) Award-winning television series written by Lynda LaPlante which was sold successfully to other parts of the world including the USA.
7. (1987-1992) Crime series created by Colin Dexter that became a cult.
8. (1993) Highly acclaimed detective series created by Jimmy McGovern, that won BAFTA awards after one series.
9. This drama was in the form of a musical and was considered revolutionary at the time in its use of the medium of television.
10. Series created by Melvyn Bragg.
11. BBC1 issued a press release a month in advance of the showing of a Desmond Morris documentary *The Human Animal* in August 1993. This series contained scenes of human exploratory sexual behaviour.
12. (1986-1990) An episode about the IRA was dropped completely by Michael Grade on the grounds of sensitivity.
13. (1984) One-off play by Barry Hines about the effect of a nuclear bomb on Sheffield.
14. (1986) Alan Bleasdale's play about a maverick corporal during World War One.
15. (1988) Play starring Colin Firth about the effects of the Falklands War on a badly injured English Officer.
16. (1981) Dir. Steven Spielberg.
17. (1986)
18. This includes a weird scene with Dennis Hopper, Isabella Rossellini and an oxygen mask.
19. (1981) Dir. Hector Babenco.
20. (1978) Dir. Derek Jarman.
21. (1986) Dir. Jean-Jacques Beineix.
22. Renewed in the summer of 1994 for a period of twelve years.
23. John Major's administration doesn't seem to be as paranoid about the political tendencies of both the BBC and ITV, unlike his predecessor. During the mid-1980s, a number of programmes incurred the wrath of the Government. These included *Real Lives* (BBC 1986), which interviewed Martin McGuinness of Sinn Fein and 'Death on the Rock' (ITV-1988), questioning the SAS' actions in Gibraltar after they assassinated three IRA bombers. (Editorial comment: This article was written some time before March 1995, which was when the Major Government started complaining about the alleged political bias displayed by the BBC in its reporting of political stories and of statistics associated with these stories.)
24. (September 1993) The programme inferred from evidence that it had collated, that young girls were getting pregnant to gain priority for council housing. A complaint was lodged by the National Council for One Parent Families (Director Sue Slipman). The BCC upheld it. It is notable that no complaints were made by single mothers themselves.