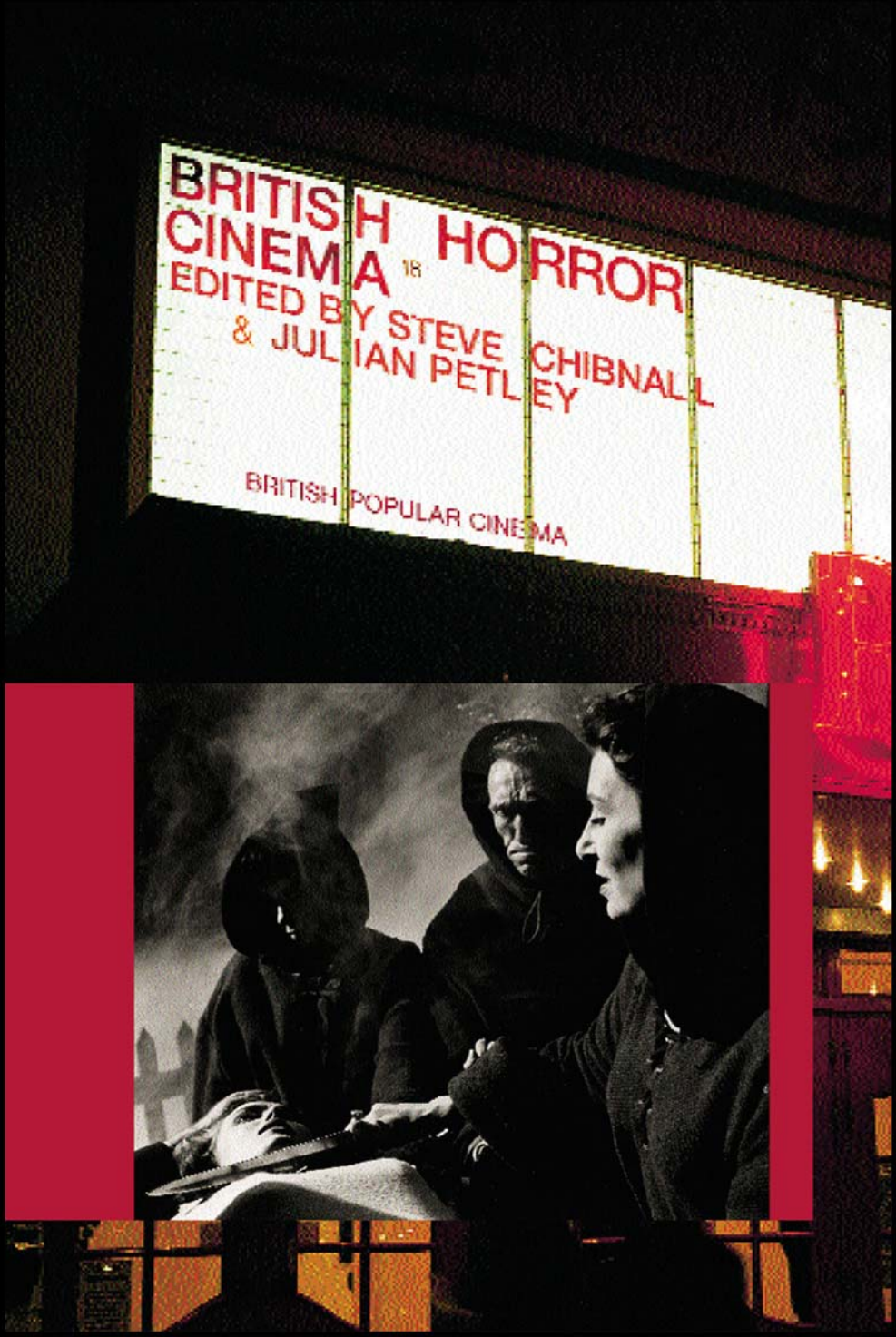

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British Horror Cinema

Horror is one of the most popular and talked-about film genres and yet British horror films, aside from those made by Hammer, have received little critical attention. *British Horror Cinema* investigates a wide range of horror film-making in Britain, from early chillers like *The Ghoul* and *Dark Eyes of London* to modern classics such as *Witchfinder General* and *The Wicker Man*.

Contributors explore the contexts in which British horror films have been censored and classified, judged by critics and consumed by fans. Uncovering neglected gems like *Death Line*, and addressing issues such as the representation of women and the family, they consider the Britishness of British horror and examine sub-genres such as the psycho-thriller and witchcraft movies, the work of the Amicus studio, and key film-makers including Pete Walker. *British Horror Cinema* also features a comprehensive filmography and contributions from contemporary horror directors Clive Barker and Richard Stanley.

Contributors: Brigid Cherry, Steve Chibnall, Ian Conrich, Leon Hunt, Peter Hutchings, Mark Kermode, Kim Newman, Marcelle Perks, Julian Petley, Steven Jay Schneider, L.S. Smith, Richard Stanley, John C. Tibbetts, Paul Wells.

Editors: **Steve Chibnall** is Principal Lecturer in Film Studies at De Montfort University, Leicester. He is the co-editor of *British Crime Cinema* (Routledge, 1999). **Julian Petley** is Senior Lecturer in Communication and Information Studies at Brunel University. He is co-editor of *Ill Effects: The Media Violence Debate, Second Edition* (Routledge, 2001).

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Paul Wells is Co-ordinator of the Media Portfolio at the University of Teesside. He has published *Art and Animation* (Academy Group/John Wiley, 1997), *Understanding Animation* (Routledge, 1998) and *The Horror Genre: From Beelzebub to Blair Witch* (Wallflower Press, 2000), the latter based on his Sony Award-winning radio series, *Spinechillers*.

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The gestation period for collections of original articles is usually longer than initially forecast by their editors. This collection is no exception to that rule, but although our optimism about how quickly it could be completed may have been unfounded, our optimism about the quality of contributions was not. We would like to thank all those who have contributed articles, especially those who delivered their work at an early date and have waited patiently to see the results of their labours in print. We also appreciate that a number of you have written for rates lower than your professional services usually command because you always believed that this was a long overdue project in academic publishing. Additional thanks must also go to Leon Smith, who tackled the job of compiling the lengthy filmography with considerable skill and enthusiasm at very short notice.

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1 The return of the repressed? British horror's heritage and future

Steve Chibnall and Julian Petley

It is now nearly thirty years since David Pirie published his seminal *A Heritage of Horror*, and far too many since it was last in print. In the intervening period there has been an explosion of interest in the Gothic in general, and in horror cinema, Gothic or otherwise, in particular. Whereas the unfortunate Pirie had little more to draw on for critical sustenance than works such as Mario Praz's *The Romantic Agony* (1933), Devendra P. Varma's *The Gothic Flame* (1957) and the journal *Midi-Minuit Fantastique* – all of them admittedly formidable in their different ways – the modern enthusiast for horror in all its forms has a truly remarkable number of texts to consult, as our contributors' bulging references amply testify.

However, in the case of texts on British horror cinema, too many fail to progress beyond considering what has become a pretty limited canon. In this respect, Jonathan Rigby's recent *English Gothic: A Century of Horror Cinema* deserves particular welcome for bringing such a wide range of films within its ambit, as does the ten-part survey of British horror in the 1970s and 1980s carried out by the magazine *Flesh and Blood*. Indeed, the appearance in recent years of genre magazines written by enthusiasts for enthusiasts has been one of the most welcome developments on the horror scene, helping to create a valuable sense of community among horror fans in hostile times, allowing new writers on horror to emerge and develop, and drawing attention to neglected films and directors. Magazines such as *Little Shoppe of Horrors*, *Dark Terrors* and *Hammer Horror* have also performed an invaluable service in minutely excavating the archaeology of Britain's most prolific supplier of fantasy films, Hammer studios. In fact the diligent burrowings of the researchers associated with these Hammer fanzines, together with academic work on the studio and its leading director by Peter Hutchings (1993 and 2001) and Wheeler Winston Dixon (1991), have cleared a space for this book to explore more neglected areas of Britain's horror film heritage. In doing so, we hope to embed the fanzines' empirical findings on production histories more securely in the generic and reception contexts of the films.

In bringing together the various contributors to this book we were certainly motivated by the desire to draw attention to films and figures outside the canon,

Figure 1 Hammer and sickle: Peter Cushing does some vampire hunting in *Twins of Evil* (1971), one of the Hammer studio's classic Gothic tales.

movies and people who have still not significantly benefited from the recent upsurge of interest in British horror cinema. To extend a metaphor first used by one of us a decade-and-a-half ago, now that the 'Lost Continent' of British fantasy cinema has been rediscovered, we want to continue its cartography beyond the landing zone. Hence, for example, Peter Hutchings's chapter on Amicus (dealt with fairly briefly by Pirie, but recently celebrated by Alan Bryce's *Amicus: The Studio That Dripped Blood* (2000), a book emanating from another fanzine, *The Dark Side*), which also very usefully suggests that, as well as locating their films within British culture at the time of their production, we also need to look at the American influences at work on them. Similarly, Ian Conrich delves further into the past than Pirie to resurrect such largely forgotten early British horrors as *Castle Sinister* (1932), *The Ghoul* (1933) and *The Face at the Window* (1939), while Marcelle Perks contributes the most substantial study to date of the woefully neglected *Death Line* (1972) and Steve Chibnall explores the work of a post-Hammer 'auteur', Pete Walker, who, for a moment in the mid-1970s, suggested new possibilities for Gothic cinema in Britain. By taking a thematic approach, as opposed to one centred on a particular auteur or company, Leon Hunt, Kim Newman and Steven Jay Schneider are able to tackle an extremely wide range of films, many of which have barely received serious consideration before, and to isolate recurring motifs and patterns which suggest the

deep cultural strains and tensions into which these films were tapping. Many of the films they discuss are original screenplays, but we are also mindful that one of the distinctive features of the horror films produced in Britain is their strong links to a tradition of fantasy literature, and these connections are foregrounded in John C. Tibbetts's close examination of the adaptation for the cinema of Henry James's novella, *The Turn of the Screw*.

This book, however, is about not simply British horror films but British horror cinema. In other words, it is concerned not simply with films as texts but with the institutions and discourses within which those texts are produced, circulated, regulated and consumed, and the book begins with three contextualizing chapters. Almost inevitably, given the amount of cutting and banning with which horror films have always had to contend in Britain, the first chapter is on censorship. Mark Kermode examines how the British Board of Film Censors/Classification has dealt with British horror films by placing this in the wider context of the Board's treatment of horror films in general. Especially valuable are his close textual readings of passages from former censor John Trevelyan's book *What the Censor Saw*, which expose many of the unspoken assumptions and attitudes underlying the censorship of the moving image in Britain. That these are extremely deep-rooted within the

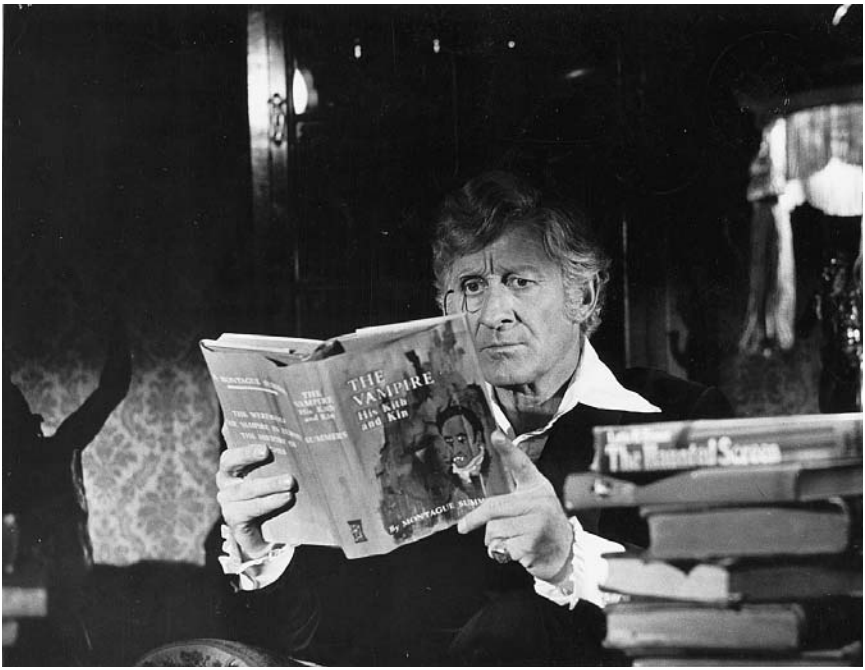

Figure 2 Literary heritage: Jon Pertwee catches up on some bedtime reading in Amicus's *The House that Dripped Blood* (1970).

British cultural establishment, of which the mainstream critics make up a key cadre, is demonstrated in Julian Petley's chapter on critical attitudes towards horror, which also suggests that, in certain respects, these attitudes have significantly hampered the development of horror cinema in Britain in recent times. The paranoia which censorship and critical denigration of the genre have fostered in many horror fans is amply illustrated by some of the remarks cited by Brigid Cherry in her study of female horror film enthusiasts. However, Cherry's main focus is the role played by horror cinema (particularly vampire films) in the lifestyle of a range of women. Her work represents an important corrective to the easy gendering of the genre's audience (and, by extension, the genre itself) as male, and offers valuable insights into the way female enthusiasts *actually* relate to the films they watch – as well as to other fans.

The last two chapters of this book attempt to bring up to date the story of the horror film in Britain. Paul Wells looks at the work of one of Britain's recent undoubted horror auteurs, Clive Barker, and, in his interview, Barker's highly articulate discussion of the genre and of his own work within it makes for a remarkable – not to say welcome and refreshing – contrast with the journeyman attitude of many of its past practitioners.[1] The same is true of the account of recent horror by Richard Stanley, who was responsible for *Hardware* (1990) and *Dust Devil* (1993), two of the last decade's most striking British entrants in the horror, or horror-related, stakes. Stanley's chapter mentions numerous British horror movies of the 1990s, but does so in a distinctly valedictory spirit, and this prompts us to conclude this introduction by reviewing the various reasons put forward for the decline of the British horror film, and by enquiring if this decline is in fact more apparent than real.

In 1973, David Pirie, in his chapter 'Towards a new horror mythology', admitted that 'the Hammer horror movie at its most traditional has inevitably suffered from an increasing public sophistication. . . . It is no longer possible to make naive straightforward English horror films that are as simple in narrative but as rich in connotation and suggestion as Hammer's early efforts' (165, 167). He also complained, with the 'Karnstein' films *The Vampire Lovers* (1970), *Lust for a Vampire* (1971) and *Twins of Evil* (1971) clearly in mind, that:

> The dark, over-laden allusiveness [of traditional Hammer] is being replaced more and more by banal sexual antics, the charged hermetic atmosphere by heavy-handed humour, the solid narrative structure by half-understood experimentation. At times the new English films even begin to look like bad imitations of the European horror films, for many of the younger British film-makers have begun to ape the overtly Freudian and surrealist intellectual quality of the French approach to horror, without understanding the essential historical value of their own tradition.
>
> (ibid.: 165)

Pirie rightly perceived the just-deceased Michael Reeves, as

> the kind of film-maker which the British cinema needed (and still needs) so desperately badly: someone who could merge the popular tradition of horror film with more avant-garde concerns without rearing the curious bastard which so often results from such experiments.

Furthermore, he contended that Reeves' *Witchfinder General* (1968)

> contains the seeds of something which could yet develop into an important cinematic idiom in this country, and one which is as intrinsically *native* to England as the western is to America. The literary romantic tradition into which it shades has as much affinity with Malory as with the Gothic and is virtually untapped by current popular English forms.
>
> (155)

Unfortunately this remains as true today as when it was written. The films based on Walpole, Radcliffe, Maturin, Lewis and other Gothic writers, which Pirie hoped to see, are still unmade, and when Pirie himself became a script writer, it was to television that he had to turn to commission his adaptations of Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* (1996) and Sheridan Le Fanu's *The Wyvern Mystery* (1999), as well as his Gothic-tinged original scripts *Rainy Day Women* (1984) and *Murder Rooms* (1999). In this respect it is extremely significant that Jonathan Rigby (2000) quotes Stephen Volk, the screenwriter of Ken Russell's *Gothic* (1986) to the effect that:

> In this country, the film establishment is so intellectually pompous that they wouldn't admit to *watching* Gothic horror, let alone commissioning it. It's one of the very few cultural exclusives that we could really exploit . . . but it's so hard to get anybody interested.
>
> (244)

Only very briefly, in a trio of films by Pete Walker, was Pirie's hope realized that British horror cinema might be able to follow the American example of George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and 'combine the best and most traditional elements of the old approach with more complex ideas and emphases' (ibid.: 167).[2] Various authors have suggested that it was precisely the British horror film's inability to keep up with modern developments in the genre which led to its alleged demise. Thus, for example, Kim Newman (1988) argues that: 'The British horror film perished because of its inability to adapt to a 1970s world beyond Home Counties Transylvania' (25), while David Sanjek (1994) similarly contends that audiences faced with the rapid and often disquieting transformations which British society was undergoing in the late 1960s and early 1970s no longer responded to the 'artificial

horrors' of the Hammer school. Instead, he argued, 'to remain worthy of attention, the British horror film would have to embrace the monstrous in [the] audience', adding that, 'few horror films produced in England between 1968 and 1975 achieved this goal' (197).

Elsewhere, Ian Conrich has argued that: 'The British horror film in its generic form has become fragmented since the early 80s. The absence of any British film studios or recognised producers of horror – a Hammer, Tigon, Tyburn – has created a weakened generic image' (1998: 27). In order to illustrate his thesis, he takes the example of Palace, which, between 1984 and 1992, produced five horror-related titles: *The Company of Wolves* (1984), *Dream Demon* (1988), *High Spirits* (1988), *Hardware* (1990) and *Dust Devil* (1993), and concentrates on how these were marketed. What Conrich's article shows is that *The Company of Wolves* was successful at least in part because it was well marketed, both to a horror audience but also, more importantly, as an 'art house' product via the Angela Carter connection. It was also a critical success. *Dream Demon*, however, pleased neither the critics nor the 'arty' types, and horror fans found it merely derivative of the *Nightmare on Elm Street* films. Finally, in what seems like an act of desperation, it was sold on the attractions of Timothy Spall and Jimmy Nail! Then, when *Hardware* came along, it was sold, at first at least, purely as if it were an American film, 'the *Terminator* for the Nineties' as *The Face* put it. Conrich quotes Daniel Battsek of Palace as stating that 'there is no point from a marketing point of view in selling a horror film as British, at least not in the beginning' (ibid.: 30). This is a bitterly ironic state of affairs for films in one of the only genres Britain can claim as its own. The difficulties which home-grown horror has faced in the market place from the 1970s onwards (not least from the consequences of intense American competition) are clearly evident in Richard Stanley's chapter in the present book. As Stanley makes all too plain, Palace's valuable if limited contribution to the horror genre was finally terminated by the collapse of the entire company. In such circumstances it may not be entirely surprising that, as Jonathan Rigby argues, '1990s British horror films seemed content merely to replicate other people's horror films, and their models tended to be American ones' (op. cit.: 244).

Palace's problems and ultimate collapse suggest that we cannot look at the state of the horror film in Britain from the 1970s onwards in isolation from the condition of British cinema as a whole during this period. The fact of the matter is that, for much of this time, the indigenous production sector has been in a state of crisis that at times has seemed almost terminal. Thus, for example, in 1971 a mere 67 films of any kind were made in Britain, and in 1982 the figure had dropped to 46. It is true that, in the early 1970s, by offering a haven for low-budget film-making, the horror genre suffered less than others from the withdrawal of American capital from British film production.[3] By the end of the decade, however, even the most modest of productions were finding it impossible to recoup their costs in their home market, as more cinemas closed and audiences dwindled. During the 1980s the general plight

Figure 3 The attractions of Timothy Spall (right) and Jimmy Nail: Palace's *Dream Demon* (1988).

of British film production improved somewhat thanks to the financial input of bodies like Channel 4 and British Screen, but their money was not directed at popular genre cinema. This has had to await National Lottery funding, but so far the main result of this largesse has been a revival of the crime, not the horror, film.

The reason for this may be quite simply that the horror genre has not yet produced its equivalent of *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* (1998) which (without Lottery funding) did so much to re-establish the crime film in Britain. One can only speculate as to why this has not happened, but it would surely be uncontroversial to suggest that the stridently censorious campaigns against horror videos since the early 1980s, and especially in the wake of the James Bulger case, would have discouraged many producers from contemplating a foray into the genre. It is, of course, true that controversy can be good for business, but only masochists would have wanted to lay themselves open to the tirade of abuse, not to mention possible censorship, which would undoubtedly have greeted anybody foolhardy enough to contemplate a British gore film in the wake of the first 'video nasty' panic. Mark Kermode's and Richard Stanley's accounts in this book of the trials and tribulations faced by Palace in their efforts to distribute *The Evil Dead* (1983) on both film and video suggest that no one in their right mind would have attempted at that time to produce a British equivalent. And just *imagine* what would happen were a film company even to suggest making a film about, say, Fred and Rosemary West in the manner of *Deranged* (1974) (which was based on the real-life US serial killer Ed Gein) or the Bulger

murder even in the mild and restrained format of *The Good Son* (1993). Indeed, even to float the idea of such projects is to risk courting controversy and to realize why Sanjek's prescription for British horror films which would confront us with the very real horrors of our own society is so problematic.[4] In a culture as jumpy and censorious as that indicated by both Kermode and Petley in this book, the idea is quite literally unthinkable. And yet, as every first-year film student knows, popular genre films can be a very effective means of exploring difficult and disturbing subjects. Not, however, the horror genre in Britain today.

This, of course, brings us back to critical attitudes towards the horror film in Britain, and leads us to the final point in our discussion about the alleged decline of the genre in this country, namely that this may be more apparent than real. In *Hammer and Beyond* (1993), Peter Hutchings notes that in the critical histories of British cinema which appeared in the 1960s and 1970s from Roy Armes, Ernest Betts, Charles Oakey, George Perry and Alexander Walker:

> Horror, one of the most commercially successful areas of British film production, is usually conspicuous by its absence or its marginality. The formulaic nature of much British horror, the way in which it seems to define itself entirely in relation to the demands of the market place, ensures that the films involved are accorded a lesser status than those films which are seen to have been made by 'artists' who in some way have transcended commercial constraints.
>
> (9–10)

Could it be that this process is still continuing? As our filmography clearly shows, a large number of British horror or horror-related titles were in fact produced during the 1980s and 1990s, but one will look in vain for any sustained discussion of them in John Hill's *British Cinema in the 1980s* (1999) and Robert Murphy's *British Cinema of the 90s* (2000), even in the chapter in the latter devoted to 'Unseen British cinema'. Contemporary British horror films have remained largely invisible to academic critics for more than twenty years, but then so had crime films before *Lock, Stock*. . . .

As we write this in early 2001, there are some signs that we might yet see the return of a repressed genre. What Pirie called 'the only staple cinematic myth which Britain can properly claim as its own' (op. cit.: 9) might be reinstated as a vital element in the national cinema. The genre in Britain may never again benefit from another Hammer studio (or even another Amicus), and it may never in the future enjoy the prominence in film production which it had in the early 1970s, but, as Guy Ritchie has demonstrated, it takes only one successful film to launch a cycle.

Notes

1 See, for example, writer and director Jimmy Sangster's account of his work for Hammer in his autobiography (1997).
2 The Walker films were *House of Whipcord* (1974), *Frightmare* (1974) and *House of Mortal Sin* (1975). Ironically, one of the few films to be made in England which *did* follow Romero was an Italian/Spanish co-production: Jorge Grau's *The Living Dead at the Manchester Morgue* (1974).
3 Our filmography demonstrates that the peak period for the exhibition in Britain of indigenous horror films was 1970–74 when some 95 new productions were screened, 25 in 1971 alone.
4 There have been a few notable attempts to film the stories of notorious British murderers. Richard Fleischer's harrowing *Ten Rillington Place* established a template in 1970, but the only films to use it have been the deeply controversial *The Black Panther* (a scrupulously unsensational account of the Lesley Whittle murder) in 1977 and Fhiona Louise's 16mm *Cold Light of Day* (a chilling insight into the crimes of serial killer Dennis Nilsen) in 1989. Much more exploitational fare appears in the form of regular true crime 'drama docs' on television.

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2 The British censors and horror cinema

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In 1960, Britain's then chief censor, John Trevelyan, decided that one of the most celebrated scenes of world cinema needed to be re-edited before it could be shown to the British public. His motives were twofold: first, the sequence, which depicted the hair-raising murder of a wet, naked woman had 'shots of blood all over the place' and was clearly 'sadistic' in intent; second, 'there had been much publicity in the press on two sensational killings, one in which a girl student had been decapitated' (Trevelyan 1973: 160). Although neither was the woman in the film a student, nor was she decapitated, Trevelyan felt that it would be best if he took a pair of scissors to the sequence 'to lessen the sadism' and generally take the sting out of the film's terrifying tale. And so it was that Mr Trevelyan sat down to re-edit the shower scene from Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), perhaps the finest sequence from one of the most influential movies ever made, and just one of the many victims of the British censors' undeclared war against horror films.

Like its literary antecedents, horror cinema has always focused upon fluctuating boundaries of taboo. It is, by its very nature, a genre of film-making which relies upon transgression. It demands that the audience's sensibilities be affronted, that decency be damned, and that (albeit temporarily) rules be broken. To censors the world over, however, horror cinema presents an insurmountable problem: How to make acceptable a brand of film-making which, at its very best, strives to be thoroughly unacceptable? In Britain, since the birth of cinema, the answer has been clumsily to neutralize and anaesthetize cutting-edge horror movies, blunting their very point and, more often than not, stripping them of whatever radical power they once possessed. Those few movies whose power stubbornly remains undiminished by the piecemeal hatcheting of key scenes are likely to find an outright ban slapped upon them. Ironically, the more inventive and effective a hard-core horror movie, the more likely it is to be butchered and banned.

The story of the British censors' strained relationship with horror cinema dates back to the beginning of the century. In 1920, The British Board of Film Censors (BBFC) seriously considered banning Robert Wiene's *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1920) on the grounds that the asylum scenes could prove unnecessarily distressing

to any members of the audience with relatives in mental institutions. (A proposed 1936 remake would later be opposed at script stage for including a parodic depiction of Hitler which might have been offensive to Germans!) In 1922, the Board did ban F.W. Murnau's genre milestone *Nosferatu*, although it has been widely suggested that this was done primarily to appease the notoriously litigious widow of Bram Stoker, who, fiercely protective of her late husband's copyright, didn't want any unauthorized version of Dracula showing up on Britain's screens. Since horror films were considered to be fairly debased fare anyway, the Board apparently had no qualms about blithely preventing the entire country from viewing what is now considered to be one of the greatest movies of all time in order to pacify one irate lady with a royalties claim who subsequently pursued the film-makers with destruction orders through the international courts.

In the early 1930s, both Tod Browning's *Dracula* (1931) and James Whale's *Frankenstein* (1931) suffered minor modifications before being allowed before the British public, the latter causing particular alarm for its eerie scene in which Karloff's monster accidentally drowns (off-screen) a little village girl with whom he has been floating flowers. Originally released with an 'A' certificate which allowed children to view if accompanied by an adult (as with the current American 'R' rating), *Frankenstein* provoked complaints from organizations such as the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), whose impassioned entreaties to the Home Office led to the establishment of the new 'H' certificate, to be reserved for movies of a 'horrific' nature.

Although the 'H' category at least provided an official mandate for the exhibition of horror films in Britain, its reign was to be extremely uneven. Throughout World War II, the distribution of horror films was effectively suppressed, presumably on the assumption that such films were bad for the soul and would therefore undermine the collective war effort. In 1950 the Wheare Committee concluded its investigations into British film censorship by suggesting 'a single category of films, which should include the present "H" category from which children should be absolutely excluded' and that the category might be designated 'X' (quoted in ibid.: 52). The subsequent introduction of the adults-only 'X' rating in 1951 was perceived at the time as a long-term solution to the growing problems facing film censorship; surely, here was a system which would allow adults (initially meaning those over 16) to enjoy the more extreme elements of cinematic entertainment while protecting younger viewers from material for which they were not yet emotionally or intellectually prepared. It looked good on paper, but sadly, in practice, the 'X' certificate continued to treat adults as little more than advanced children, still blunting the sharpness of cutting-edge cinema, and therefore inevitably wreaking the worst damage upon that most extreme of genres, the horror film.[1] Whereas significant developments were made in the portrayal of screen sex throughout the 1950s, horror remained the subject of the censor's wrath, often inflaming the passions of the legendary John Trevelyan, whose published views on the genre