

GLOBAL EXPLOITATION CINEMAS

The background of the cover is a photograph of a red cinema door. On the door, there is a sign that reads "Now Showing" in a cursive font, followed by "PROGRAMME of" in a sans-serif font, a large stylized "X" in the center, and "FILMS" at the bottom. The door has a vertical crease and some wear and tear. The overall color scheme is dominated by red and orange tones.

ADULT THEMES

**BRITISH CINEMA AND THE X
CERTIFICATE IN THE LONG 1960s**

**EDITED BY ANNE ETIENNE, BENJAMIN
HALLIGAN & CHRISTOPHER WEEDMAN**

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Adult Themes

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Adult Themes

British Cinema and the X Certificate in the Long 1960s

Edited by

*Anne Etienne, Benjamin Halligan
and Christopher Weedman*

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Introduction:

‘Passed As Only Suitable for Exhibition to Adult Audiences: X’

*Anne Etienne, Benjamin Halligan and
Christopher Weedman*

On the eve of his appointment as secretary of the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC) in May 1958, John Trevelyan declared that the X certificate would facilitate a new mature era in British cinema: ‘Now there is practically no adult subject which could not be considered for an “X” certificate if treated with sincerity and restraint’ (cited in Aldgate 1995: 39). Trevelyan’s pronouncement specifically aligned the X certificate with adult themes treated with artistic honesty.¹ Within a few short years, such vaunted filmmakers as Lindsay Anderson, Jack Clayton, Karel Reisz, Tony Richardson and John Schlesinger would embody this principled conception of X certificate cinema. Arguably being the first directors in British film history to provide the ‘adults only’ rating with a sheen of cultural prestige and respectability, their internationally acclaimed New Wave features ‘were generally seen by critics of the time as a step forward for British cinema, a move towards a mature, intelligent engagement with contemporary British social life and a welcome breath of fresh air after the conformist entertainment provided by studio-bound British filmmakers in the first part of the 1950s’ (Hutchings 2002: 146–7). However, studies like Peter Hutchings’s *Hammer and Beyond: The British Horror Film* (1993), Leon Hunt’s *British Low Culture: From*

Safari Suits to Sexploitation (1998) and Sian Barber's *Censoring the 1970s: The BBFC and the Decade that Taste Forgot* (2011) have shown that the X certificate continued to be routinely courted by exploitation filmmakers, who viewed it as 'a badge of honour' (Barber 2012: 26). The commerciality of the X certificate's risqué character may best be gauged by Hammer Films' eagerness to market their early sci-fi horror features as *The Quatermass Xperiment* (Val Guest 1955) and *X the Unknown* (Leslie Norman 1956), which, in the case of the former, was accompanied by publicity material encouraging cinema house managers to 'Xploit the Xcitement' of the film (Chibnall 2012: 47–8; Hearn 2011: 8). A contested terrain for gate-keepers and gate-pushers alike, British X certificate cinema was mired in controversy from its appearance in 1951.

Newspapers regularly boasted headlines with urgent pleas from conservative commentators, government officials and religious pressure groups to vanquish graphic images of sex, horror and violence from the nation's cinema screens. By the end of the 1950s, as the taboo excesses of Hammer horror and sexually provocative features like *The Flesh Is Weak* (Don Chaffey 1957), *Passport to Shame* (Alvin Rakoff 1958) and *Room at the Top* (Clayton 1959) were generating curiosity and ticket sales at the UK box office, the press condemned British filmmakers for their recent efforts to align the 'adults only' rating with sensationalist entertainment. For instance, *The Coventry Evening Telegraph* bemoaned the incessant

wave of horror films involving things from under the earth, the sea, and from other planets, Draculas, Frankensteins and various other monsters. These, with a number of nudist films and the usual 'exposés' of low life, were and are a blot on the cinema, worms eating into the bud of a plant which thoughtful film makers and perceptive filmgoers are trying so hard to cultivate.

(‘The Best Pictures’ 1959)

During the 1960s, thematically bold and adventurous British cinema grew to become largely synonymous with the X certificate, mirroring the sociocultural and moral transformations of the decade as discussed by Anthony Aldgate in *Censorship and the Permissive Society: British Cinema and Theatre 1955–1965* (1995: 33–62) as well as in Richard Farmer et al's *Transformation and Tradition in 1960s British Cinema* (2019: 1–7). Often based on the works of writers associated with kitchen sink realism, the British New Wave films of Anderson (*This Sporting Life*, 1963), Clayton (*Room at the Top*), Richardson (*Look Back in Anger*, 1959; *A Taste of Honey*, 1961; and *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner*, 1962) and Schlesinger (*A Kind of Loving*, 1962 and *Billy Liar*, 1963) offered cynical and unromanticized depictions of provincial life allied with a new frankness in tackling sexual mores, which reinvigorated and politicized British

filmmaking. At the same time, the general liberalization that was afforded by the X certificate in the 1960s was also exploited by a parade of less idealistic filmmakers, studios and distributors intent on producing titillating and sensational entertainment rather than socially engaged art.

By the close of that decade, and following the heyday of the British New Wave, the Swinging Sixties had come to be mirrored by a 'swinging' (often London-centred) adult cinema that extended into the mid-1970s: X films by both native and foreign directors pushed back the boundaries of the representations of sex and violence; they seemed to relish breaking with societal norms, and so recalibrated cinema as an occasionally dangerous, potentially transgressive and often intellectual art form. Navigating between arthouse and exploitation cinema, directors such as Anderson (*if ...*, 1968 and *O Lucky Man!*, 1973), Michelangelo Antonioni (*Blow-Up*, 1966), Donald Cammell and Nicolas Roeg (*Performance*, 1970), Peter Collinson (*The Penthouse*, 1967; *Up the Junction*, 1968; *The Long Day's Dying*, 1968; *Fright*, 1971; *Straight on Till Morning*, 1972; and *Innocent Bystanders*, 1972), Lewis Gilbert (*Alfie*, 1966; *Friends*, 1971; and *Paul and Michelle*, 1974), Mike Hodges (*Get Carter*, 1971), Stanley Kubrick (*Lolita*, 1962 and *A Clockwork Orange*, 1971), Joseph Losey (*The Criminal*, 1960; *Eve*, 1962; *The Damned*, 1963; *The Servant*, 1963; *King & Country*, 1964; *Boom!*, 1968; and *Secret Ceremony*, 1968), Roman Polanski (*Repulsion*, 1965 and *Cul-de-Sac*, 1966), Michael Reeves (*Revenge of the Blood Beast*, 1966; *The Sorcerers*, 1967; and *Witchfinder General*, 1968), Schlesinger (*Darling*, 1965 and *Sunday Bloody Sunday*, 1971), Jerzy Skolimowski (*Deep End*, 1971) and Michael Winner (*West 11*, 1963; *The System*, 1964; *I'll Never Forget What's'isname*, 1967; and *The Nightcomers*, 1971) met in the X category, where they became odd bedfellows for the censors. In this sense, British X certificate cinema of this era may be characterized as one of adult themes. By the dawn of the 1970s, this category of films was well equipped to engage with the turbulence to come, as the dreams of the welfare state, and peace, love and harmony turned to strife, strikes and unrest – that new decade, since posited as a 'hangover from the sixties' and characterized by Andy Beckett as 'when the lights went out' (2010: 2). As a whole, X certificate films from the late 1950s through the mid-1970s seem to have taken on an essential role of tracking, exploring, exploiting and mythologizing an emergent society.²

For this reason, the volume focuses on the long 1960s rather than the lifetime of the X certificate (1951–82) to question to what extent, and how and why, X films can be understood as the outriders, agitators, nay-sayers and voyeurs of this emerging contemporary society. This periodization is roughly aligned to the historian Arthur Marwick's 'long 1960s', which he describes as spanning 'the late 1950s to the middle 1970s' (2005: 780), first postulated in his seminal study *The Sixties* (1998).³ In this respect, our 'long 1960s' start in the immediate wake of the winding down of a post-war culture

of austerity (with, for example, the televised coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953, and the ending of food rationing in 1954), and the UK's grappling with its diminished, post-Empire position in Cold War-era geopolitics (acutely felt in the Suez Canal Crisis of 1956 and Prime Minister Harold Macmillan's 'Wind of Change' speech of 1960 recognizing decolonization). As contributors to this volume argue, this historical juncture is particularly marked in British cinema by an emphasis on a changing society – especially in terms of new youth cultures, variously presented as hedonistic, criminal, disenchanted and relatively affluent. When Trevelyan took up the position of Board secretary of the BBFC in 1958, he understood his role as that of a modernizer and so was able to manage this new, unruly British cinema, often via a resort to the X certificate ('John Trevelyan' 1958: 1; Trevelyan 1958: 8). The X was increasingly deployed not as a matter of quarantining a film, or warding off potential viewers, but of accepting and approving for distribution films exemplifying a freedom of artistic expression concomitant with the sense of an adult cultural medium. Since the spirit of the freedoms of the 1960s continued to resonate in British cinema well into the 1970s – and with Trevelyan's 1971 successor, Stephen Murphy, grappling with that legacy – we end our periodization in the years that are understood to have precipitated Murphy's departure from the BBFC in 1975 (see Plate 1).

Building upon a significant body of scholarship on British cinema between the 1950s and 1970s, as found in the pioneering criticism of Raymond Durnat (1971) and John Hill (1986) to the more recent reappraisals of Duncan Petrie, Melanie Williams and Laura Mayne (2022) and Melvyn Stokes, Matthew Jones and Emma Pett (2022), this collection is the first to specifically chart X certificate British cinema across the long (and swinging) Sixties.⁴ A number of the films explored, from some of the most acclaimed filmmakers of this generation, are now deemed masterpieces. The X certificates awarded by the BBFC did little to deter audiences – and were even considered by the filmmakers to be a licence to go ever further, or a teasing promise (when seen in promotional advertising like the iconic yet highly controversial image of Sue Lyon wearing sunglasses and sucking a lollipop on the poster for *Lolita*) of the provocative and sometimes troubling content to come. Instead, the 'adults only' rating tended to attract the exact demographic it was originally designed to protect: underage teenagers, who often found 'forbidden fruit films' such as *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* and *A Taste of Honey* to be, in the retrospective words of one patron, 'sexy, when puberty was approaching' (cited in Stokes, Jones, and Pett 2022: 105). Other lesser-known films, from often forgotten or disreputable filmmakers, are anything but masterpieces and, at times, could be found playing 'flea pit cinemas' with 'seedy reputations' (26).⁵ Their X certificate ratings were a matter of punitive negotiation with the BBFC, and with the censor's sharp scissors in near-constant use, as discussed by Adrian Smith in relation to the Board's handling of the Compton Group's

sexploitation film *Secrets of a Windmill Girl* (Arnold Louis Miller 1966). And yet such films remain as provocative cultural artefacts of their times, and deserving of critical attention, or even rediscovery.

‘Please Receive the following Films for Censorship’

The X certificate was all the more contentious because, as chapters will highlight, it provoked tensions between the BBFC and local authorities. From its beginnings in 1912, the role of the BBFC was to ‘protect the public from any risk of the production of objectionable pictures’ (McKenna 1912), but its authority was not officially recognized by county councils (that dealt with cinema licences) before 1920. Since then, the certificate was a requirement in public cinema licences, the system of film submission became standardized and the classification categories were established (Trevelyan 1967: 126–7).⁶

The protection of children was given as the underlying principle of the certification system, which contained three categories marking the age division in the 1960s: U, for films suitable for all; A (for ‘adult’), for films suitable for children under the age of sixteen if accompanied by a parent; X, for films with adult themes restricted to patrons above the age of sixteen (Hunnings 1967: 140–6; Trevelyan 1977: 82).⁷ Pertinent to our study of the X as contested territory are the H and AA certificates. The H certificate (for ‘horrific’), in use between 1932 and 1951, proved an apt category for horror films that contained disturbing and frightening scenes. In 1950, however, the Departmental Committee on Children and the Cinema (better known as the Wheare Committee) recommended that an X certificate be added for content ‘unsuitable for children under sixteen, even accompanied by an adult’ (Hunnings 1967: 143; ‘Cert “X” is O.K.’ 1950). For BBFC Board Secretary Arthur Watkins, the new X certificate would permit ‘“unquestionably adult” films to be passed instead of certificates being refused’ (*The Yorkshire Evening Post*, 14 December 1950).

Despite Trevelyan’s relaxed attitude, viewing the BBFC’s role as ‘a kind of barometer of public taste for the industry’ as far as the X was concerned, his stance was still conservative compared to other countries which he described as immersed by the ‘tidal wave of sex obsession spreading through Europe’ (1970: 26–7). For instance, *The Keeler Affair* (Robert Spafford 1963), based on the Profumo scandal, had been banned in Britain while it was passed as 18 in France (Bier 2000: 16), and Julian Upton uses further examples to show that ‘the existing ratings system seem[ed] untenable’ (2017: 65). By the end of the decade, as a result of the increasing explicitness in the treatment of adult material, 219 films were awarded an X in 1969, more

than the other two certificates combined (Trevelyan 1970: 28). As debates around permissiveness and pornography in the cinema signalled the need for a solution that would satisfy gate-keepers without hampering the industry – and possibly the expression of a daring *cinéma d’auteurs* – the BBFC launched a new system. From 1970, the sixteen age boundary was revisited, so that the AA certificate forbade access to spectators under fourteen, while the viewing age of an X film was raised to eighteen – thereby identifying them respectively as the teenage and the adult certificates (Phelps 1975: 49, 103; Trevelyan 1977: 62–3; Upton 2017). Until a new and completely overhauled BBFC classification system eliminated both ratings in 1982 (Barber 2011: 137), the X certificate became steadily less centred around Trevelyan’s conception of the ‘adults only’ rating as a framework for auteurs to make adult-themed films with artistic honesty and, as Lucy Brett explains, more often found itself largely the province of films desiring to go beyond the pale of good taste (2017: 239), as discussed by Benjamin Halligan in the final chapter.

Placing the focus on the long 1960s therefore enables the authors in this collection to explore a key period in the evolution of the X certificate, which became a useful tag for sexually charged films and films containing disturbing and violent images that were destined for an adult audience. In addition, the decade bears the stamp of Trevelyan for two reasons. First, Trevelyan was the first secretary of the Board to be selected by the film trade associations in 1958, rather than by the president of the Board (Trevelyan 1967: 127). Since then, the responsibilities of the BBFC have been shared: the president designing the broad general policy, and the secretary being in charge of the executive. Second, his take on censorship not only responded to the liberalizing mores of the Swinging Sixties but was also influenced by his desire to encourage the bold influx of directors: artistic quality and the integrity of the filmmakers proved a decisive aspect when awarding certificates. As a result, Trevelyan’s memoirs indicate that he favoured the work (and the company) of British and international filmmakers such as Joseph Losey, for whom he had ‘admiration and affection’ (1977: 209), Dušan Makavejev, who ‘has since acquired an international reputation’ (116), Stanley Kubrick and his ‘brilliant analysis of violence in contemporary society’ (128–9), the ‘outstanding film-maker’ Roman Polanski (122), John Schlesinger, of admirable ‘creative talent’ (208) and even filmmaking collaborators Andy Warhol and Paul Morrissey.⁸

According to a memorandum submitted by the BBFC to the 1966 Joint Select Committee on Censorship of the Theatre, ‘the Board has no rules’ (Trevelyan 1967: 128). Such an admission may be interpreted as a refusal to itemize forbidden topics or a way to avoid being caught in contradictory decisions – as similar cases had befallen and publicly embarrassed Lords Chamberlain since the turn of the century – and indeed it enabled the Board to ‘change policy without any announcement’ (130). At a time when control

over the stage was foundering and Prime Minister Harold Wilson's Labour government was aware of the transfer of material across media and the discrepancies it created, the BBFC may also have wanted to dispel unhelpful comparisons with television. Since the passing of the 1964 Television Act, the Independent Television Authority was required to draw up a code in relation to violence in programme content and for the protection of children – a central concern for the BBFC, as evidenced by the evolution of the X certificate – thereby aligning standards with 'those to which the BBC must operate' (Le Cheminant 1967). Instead of a stringent and cumbersome protocol, the BBFC viewed their approach as 'a general working policy at any one time': the flexible and evolving process takes into account the examiners' 'divergent views' and the decision aims to reflect what 'would be the opinion of most reasonable and intelligent people' (Trevelyan 1967: 128, 129).

Trevelyan heralded a new era in terms of the films' assessment apparatus that earned him the epithet of 'the film censor with the diplomatic touch' in his *Times* obituary ('Obituary' 1986). At the core of most chapters in this volume, recourse to BBFC files of this period illustrates a multi-layered discursive and often informal process which would involve a variation of the following actions. The bulk of the examiners' work was to view and assess completed films, and each case file contains the formal submission of a film for certification, with a cover sheet emblazoned 'Please Receive the following Films for Censorship'. Sheaths of notes (sometimes unsigned) for internal use only would be produced on each film by any two of the five examiners: some were messily written (presumably scribbled in semi-dark and at speed, during BBFC screenings), while others clearly originate from later public screenings as they comment on audience composition (Aldgate 1995: 45–7). A summative response would then be drafted to filmmakers, listing cuts requested on an 'Exception Form' – evidence can be found there that Trevelyan's diplomatic skills were at work in conciliating with the more outraged examiners, as well as with the filmmakers when he engaged in a lengthy back-and-forth correspondence around requests. However, and though not compulsory this had been a practice since the first iteration of the Board in 1912, most British filmmakers would also send their scripts for pre-production advice.⁹ This preliminary correspondence between Trevelyan and filmmakers (producers and directors) would often expand to discussions, the main points of which were also recorded in the files. Trevelyan was a particularly hands-on secretary as he also intervened during the production and editing phases, so that case files may contain comments on early assembly screenings of films. As noted in his memoirs, he 'used to see "rough-cuts" or "fine-cuts" of their films with them [Schlesinger and Losey], and we used to have long talks afterwards ... they regarded me more as an advisor or consultant than a censor' (1977: 209). Finally and on occasion, Trevelyan would pen a letter thanking the filmmaker for their

troubles, lightly apologizing for BBFC interference, or suggesting that the film – now classified for general release – is all the better for the BBFC's intervention.

‘The Less We Have of Groups of “Queers” in Bars, and Clubs and Elsewhere the Better’

Of all the subjects visible in British X certificate cinema of this period, it is striking that male homosexuality seems almost entirely absent as a main, formal focus. Across the long 1960s, X certificate films did not shy away from subtextual homosexual themes, but they depicted them with varying degrees of visibility and understanding. Homosexual characters and subcultures tended to be depicted as being subsumed into outwardly respectable modes of life such as Dirk Bogarde's married barrister Melville Farr in *Victim* (Basil Dearden 1961) and (arguably) the actor's dutiful manservant Barrett in *The Servant*; clear but unspoken ‘types’, as seen in Stephen Bourne's coded readings of Murray Melvin's ‘lonely’ textile design student Geoffrey Ingham in *A Taste of Honey*,¹⁰ Brock Peters's ‘warm’ and ‘gentle’ jazz musician Johnny in *The L-Shaped Room* (Bryan Forbes 1962), and Dudley Sutton's ‘kind and understanding’ motorcyclist Pete in *The Leather Boys* (Sidney J. Furie 1964) ([1996] 2016: 148, 167 and 178); and over-the-top caricatures either safely quarantined through the casting of avowedly heterosexual actors such as Richard Burton and Rex Harrison's bickering hairdressers Harry and Charles in *Staircase* (Stanley Donen 1969) or employed as satirical embodiments of the transgressive sexual mores of the ‘permissive society’ such as Harry Andrews's ostentatious businessman Ed in *Entertaining Mr Sloane* (Douglas Hickox 1970). Likewise, homosexual concerns could be found in moments of general homosexual ambiances, as well as subplots involving supporting or briefly glimpsed minor characters in high-profile releases such as *Darling*, *Deadfall* (Forbes 1968), *if ...*, the two Ken Russell films *Women in Love* (1969) and *The Music Lovers* (1971), *Goodbye Gemini* (Alan Gibson 1970), *Villain* (Michael Tuchner 1971) and *Zee & Co.* (Brian G. Hutton 1972); or through quick asides, innuendos or intimations in films such as *Serious Charge* (Terence Young 1959), *No Love for Johnnie* (Ralph Thomas 1961), *The Family Way* (Roy Boulting 1966), *Two Gentlemen Sharing* (Ted Kotcheff 1969) and *Performance*. Two Oscar Wilde biopics unavoidably dealt with the subject too: *Oscar Wilde* (Gregory Ratoff 1960) and *The Trials of Oscar Wilde* (Ken Hughes 1960). BBFC responses to these films were variable, and predicated (as noted below) on their sense of artistic worth – but generally the BBFC enabled the films to be distributed in some form.

Darling captures casual homophobic comments via a vox pops scene, includes camp aristocrats seen taking advantage of ‘boys’ at a party (and

where their predatory sexuality is racialized too), a then-daring visual repurposing of a portrait of the Queen, a gay photographer and scenes of casual gay pick-ups around a group of homosexual friends in Capri. However, the film is so predominantly heterosexual in its focus that all of these elements, groundbreaking in themselves, seem little more than fleeting details in its panorama of modern society. The homosexuality of *Villain* is bolder, and in this sense very notable for this period, but remains problematic: the sexual encounters include the same kind of violence that the protagonist Vic Dakin, Richard Burton's Ronnie Kray-like London gangster, visits on his victims, and are introduced with a sinister electronic score. His boyfriend, Wolfie (Ian McShane), is also depicted working as a pimp, procuring both males and females (including his own girlfriend, despite her protests) for swinging aristocratic parties. Trevelyan suggested that the homosexual element could be cut 'entirely' from *Villain*, so as to avoid 'stimulation': 'I have in mind these horrible cases that we get occasionally where naked young men are found dead, tied up and mutilated' (cited in Simkin 2012: 83). Moreover, Trevelyan's general guidance, drawing on his examiners' positions but echoing too the commentary on the decriminalization of homosexuality (see below), was: '[w]e feel that the more we can see of the characters going about their daily lives in association with other people who are not "queers", the less we have of groups of "queers" in bars, and clubs and elsewhere the better' (cited in Hargreaves 2012: 58). Simkin notes that *Goodbye Gemini* was cut for homosexual content as was, '[r]ather oddly, *Eskimo Nell* [Martin Campbell 1975, which] had a cut described thus: "Remove the word "Vaseline" on Scrabble Board & shot of homosexual's face as he looks at it"' (Simkin 2012: 83). One could assume that the subject matter of these two films (Swinging London youths and exploitation filmmaking, respectively), along with Trevelyan's serial killers, and 'bars, and clubs and elsewhere', was insufficiently exalted for a BBFC X acceptance of gay matters. Luchino Visconti's Italo-French co-production *Death in Venice* (1971), on the other hand, which obsessively concerned same-sex desire, received an AA certificate and a Royal premiere on 1 March 1971, with Queen Elizabeth II and Princess Anne meeting both Visconti and the film's star, Bogarde, prior to the screening.¹¹

Historians of British cinema have tended to mount subtextual analyses or identified a 'queering' of 'norms' in order to identify often circumstantial or liminal evidence of cultures of male sexual difference.¹² Such readings seek to reorientate the deeper meanings of these films, aligned to wider debates about representation and identity in popular culture. However, in the light of work on sexual fluidity by Jane Ward (2015), they now seem somewhat deterministic in their binary categorizations. Sexual ambiguity could, after all, simply be taken as sexual ambiguity rather than palimpsest-like expediency on the part of sexual fugitives. Some films of the period embraced such ambiguity, albeit sometimes via elements of trans characterizations which

are configured as gender-ambiguous, such as *Cul-de-Sac*, *Goodbye Gemini* and *Girl Stroke Boy* (Bob Kellett 1971). Others went farther by suggesting fluid sexual orientations such as Helmut Berger's bisexual portrayal of Dorian Gray in *Il dio chiamato Dorian* (*Das Bildnis des Dorian Gray/Dorian Gray*, Massimo Dallamano 1970). Set against the backdrop of Swinging London, and freely invoking Oscar Wilde to indicate scandalous sexual nonconformity, this Italo-West German-UK co-production from British exploitation producer Harry Alan Towers includes a dream-like sequence on a yacht where Dorian leaves the erotic embraces of two bisexual women before getting into a shower with aristocratic libertine Lord Henry Wotton (Herbert Lom), who lathers Dorian's shoulders with soap just before the camera zooms out through a porthole. This implied initiation into same-sex acts is immediately followed by another brief scene, where Dorian cruises the harbour docks for male sailors, including a young Black man with whom he later exchanges homoerotic glances in a public lavatory. Nevertheless, this absence of a formal focus on male homosexuality in the X film culture of the long 1960s is all the more surprising, since the 1957 Wolfenden Report's recommendation for the partial decriminalization of homosexuality had come into effect with the Sexual Offences Act of 1967 – albeit begrudgingly, on the part of the British state (Davies 1975: 120–4; Weeks [1981] 1992: 239–44).¹³ There was, therefore, no legal basis for homophobic censorship beyond 1967. However, Trevelyan's urgings to effectively banish homosexual figures closely parallel the general establishment consensus on the matter at this point; even the reforming champion of the Sexual Offences Act of 1967, Arthur Gore, 8th Earl of Arran, would advise, in the House of Lords, that those 'for whom the prison doors are now open' should

[...] show their thanks by comporting themselves quietly and with dignity. This is no occasion for jubilation; certainly not for celebration. Any form of ostentatious behaviour, now or in the future, any form of public flaunting, would be utterly distasteful and would, I believe, make the sponsors of the Bill regret that they have done what they have done. Homosexuals must continue to remember that while there may be nothing bad in being a homosexual, there is certainly nothing good.

(Gore 1967)

Rare exceptions to the BBFC's position included *Sunday Bloody Sunday*, in the figure of a gay, middle-aged doctor played by Peter Finch, and with the filmmakers seemingly making up for homosexual invisibility through a relatively prolonged shot of two men kissing; and the semi-documentary *A Bigger Splash* (Jack Hazan 1973), which offered an immersion in the world of artist David Hockney, described as 'respond[ing] to his gay "stigma" by challenging social and aesthetic conventions in life and art' (Babuscio 1977: 42). In both a 1976 essay for *Gay Left* and the 1977 scholarly collection

Gays and Film, Richard Dyer finds rich material in European and North American cinemas, but barely anything from the UK.¹⁴ He expresses frustration at the proliferation of homosexual stereotypes in films from both sides of the Atlantic, despite their limited progressive potential in a heteronormative mainstream, and the inadequacy of any counter movement towards ‘rounded gay characters’ – a category of inadequacy that seems to include *Sunday Bloody Sunday* for Dyer, whose homosexual protagonist he described as embodying ‘mature resignation’ (1977: 36). Instead, Dyer calls for ‘the development of positively valued gay types’ (1976: 11). Dyer’s intervention would later be validated by research into the reception of 1960s gay British films by gay, and mostly young, cinemagoers; Stokes, Jones and Pett conclude that ‘[t]he 1960s may have witnessed the first stirrings of a movement to represent gayness more fairly and sympathetically in British films, but both the films themselves and many of those who watched them [often with some bafflement] still had a long way to go’ (2022: 63).

The beginnings of a renaissance in gay visibility would not occur until the mid- to late-1970s, in terms of some serious grapplings with societal prejudices (as with Ron Peck’s 1978 drama *Nighthawks*) and a full embrace of the ‘otherness’ of homosexual subcultures (most particularly in the work of Derek Jarman, notably 1976’s *Sebastiane*, co-directed with Paul Humfress).¹⁵ We speculate that producers, across the turn of the 1970s, simply remained unwilling to invest in pronounced gay subjects, fearing little to no audience and poor financial returns. Nevertheless, other cultural factors may have mitigated against, or stunted or delayed, the development of a gay British cinema during this period as well. These factors ranged on the spectrum from homophobic outrages from the tabloid press, coupled with the ascendancy of British conservatism as a backlash to 1968 and the ‘permissive society’, to the consequences of such moralism in daily life. Of this time, Jarman recalled:

I was put up against the wall there many years ago by a violent gang who I thought were queerbashing. I was walking back home to Earl’s Court from a showing of my film *Sebastiane*, nothing more exciting, when I was jumped on. Only the fact that I was middle-class, white and had a film on at The Gate [Cinema, Notting Hill] stopped a verbal assault – ‘You fucking queer’ – becoming physical. This gang were the police.

(Jarman and Christie 1993: 23)

The courts were seemingly equally lacking in sympathy: Mary Whitehouse successfully prosecuted the *Gay News* (and a contributing author, James Kirkup) in 1977 after their publication of a homoerotic poem about Jesus Christ, on the grounds of blasphemy (Nash 2017).

Consequently, there is a lack of material that would enable the inclusion of a chapter on male homosexuality, as identified as a main, formal focus

of British filmmaking, within the historical scope of this study. Conversely, female homosexuality appears to have been a subject less troubling to the British establishment of the 1960s. Same-sex acts between women are present in films of this period – albeit reconfigured as a kink for heterosexual male titillation, particularly, as Claire Henry argues in a chapter within this volume, by Hammer Film Productions, once the popular horror film company began to financially flounder in the 1970s.

Exploring the X

The chapters in this collection engage with a body of X certificate films (lesser-known features or unexplored aspects of well-known films) to explore the limits of the permissive society from across arthouse and exploitation forms of British cinema, via mainstream studio films like *Alfie* and *Zee & Co.* In so doing, they illustrate the cultural, social and commercial value of both forms of production and the ways in which they sometimes merge due to fragile boundaries or the marketing strategies employed to promote them. In order to highlight the evolution of the culture of British X certificate cinema, and draw conclusions that will reframe this period of British cinema history, the volume adopts a chronological structure, alternating discourses on sexuality, violence and horror, or – in some cases – combining them. In their chapters, the contributors employ a variety of critical methodologies and exploit sources ranging from newly discovered archival material to personal interviews and promotional items. As an apt opener to the volume's chronological scope, Kim Newman's chapter traces the transgressive patterns of a cycle of sado-erotic thrillers and horror films that he dubs 'Green Penguin' cinema. An intriguing generic synthesis of gothic horror, crime and mystery conventions, Newman finds the imprint of Green Penguin cinema in a large number of 1960s and 1970s X certificate films, ranging from *Strip Tease Murder* (Ernest Morris 1961) to *Frightmare* (Pete Walker 1974). Green Penguin themes and styles sometimes trickled down to films granted lower age classifications, which can be seen in the A and AA certificates respectively awarded to *The Very Edge* (Cyril Frankel 1963) and *I Start Counting* (David Greene 1970). This provides some indication that an X sensibility permeated a wider group of British films during the permissive era.

This blurring of boundaries was also indicative of the films of Raymond Stross, as discussed by Christopher Weedman. An independent producer of self-consciously controversial dramas that straddled the line between arthouse and sensationalist cinema, Stross was among the first British filmmakers – apart from Hammer Films – to understand both the narrative freedoms and commercial possibilities that the X certificate afforded. After charting the evolution of the producer's career and persistent interest

in exploring contentious social and sexual issues, Weedman traces the censorship history and reception of Stross's prostitution exposé *The Flesh Is Weak*, which was banned by the Watch Committee in the provincial seaside town of Worthing in September 1957. The desire of late 1950s British filmmakers to push the envelope in terms of sex and violence was not confined to subject matter alone. Sarah Street's analysis of Eastmancolor cinematography suggests that in *Horrors of the Black Museum* (Arthur Crabtree 1959) and *Peeping Tom* (Michael Powell 1960) the bold use of colour – and red in particular – foregrounds an artistic tension between the filmmakers' desire to both explore the aesthetic possibilities of colour and heighten the level of realistic graphic violence on screen. In the process, the films created a transgressive visual style that would become synonymous with the X certificate through much of its existence.

Looking at British New Wave cinema, Simon Lee reconsiders the seminal working-class drama *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* with an emphasis on how the film's Czech-born director Karel Reisz acted as a mediator, who negotiated the occasionally conflicting objectives of the producers, writer Alan Sillitoe and the BBFC. Lee contends that while the film's producers were eager to capitalize on the film's daring sexual content, Sillitoe was instead intent on ensuring that neither the producers nor the BBFC would soften the subversive socialist rhetoric of the story's rebellious protagonist Arthur Seaton, who, like his narrative proxy Sillitoe, did not want to 'let the bastards grind you down'.

In his analysis of Stanley Kubrick's 1962 screen adaptation of *Lolita*, James Fenwick tackles the problematic sexual mores of the 1960s by offering a new perspective to previous studies. The chapter concerns itself with the correspondence between Kubrick and Canon L. J. Collins, the founder of the UK-based activist religious group Christian Action, who unequivocally objected to the director's intention of filming the novel's inflammatory story of a sexually exploitative relationship between an adult and a child. Drawing upon both archival evidence and recent allegations surrounding the making of the film, Fenwick demonstrates how the illicit depictions of sexuality afforded by the X certificate, in the case of *Lolita*, continue to reverberate more than half a century later. Kevin Flanagan addresses this theme of corrupted youths, this time in films that show them as moral and legal transgressors. He explores the cultural tension of bohemianism and paternalism found in a series of X certificate films about pre-Swinging London youth subcultures, including *Beat Girl* (Edmond T. Gréville 1960), *That Kind of Girl* (Gerry O'Hara 1963) and *London in the Raw* (Arnold Louis Miller 1964), but best exemplified by *The Party's Over*. Although made in 1963, *The Party's Over* was withheld from distribution until 1965 as the film's director, Guy Hamilton, endured a protracted dispute with Trevelyan and the BBFC over the film's look at bohemian youths imbibing in alcohol, jazz and sex, which culminates in both death and implied necrophilia. Assessing the censorship

negotiations and press coverage surrounding *The Party's Over*, Flanagan argues that the film embodied the era's paternalistic cultural anxieties about American popular culture subverting the sensibilities of metropolitan youth.

Second-wave feminism burgeoned in the 1960s when the sexual revolution (aided by the access to oral contraception) was accompanied by reforms that would affect women's lives and rights (for instance, the revision of the Married Women's Property Act in 1964 or the 1967 Abortion Act). Three chapters discuss different aspects of the representation of women across arthouse, mainstream and exploitation cinema. Moya Luckett investigates the permissive attitudes towards female sexuality in a strain of mid- to late 1960s women-centred films such as *Darling*, *The Knack ... and How to Get It* (Richard Lester 1965), *The Pleasure Girls* (Gerry O'Hara 1965), *Her Private Hell* (Norman J. Warren 1968) and *Joanna* (Michael Sarne 1968), which highlight how the era's alluring depictions of young women's urban chic lifestyles and liberated sexuality were largely mediatized constructs. As Luckett contends, these films capitalized on the type of risqué content promised by the X certificate and, at the same time, were part of a larger cultural discourse surrounding issues of consumerism, femininity and modernity, which remain integral to the mythology of Swinging London. Adrian Smith guides us through the seedy world of British sexploitation cinema in his discussion of *Secrets of a Windmill Girl*. Consulting newly found archival materials related to the production, distribution and reception of the 1966 film and its retrospective portrayal of the nude showgirls that once headlined the Windmill Theatre, Smith reveals the sensationalist promotional and exhibition strategies utilized by independent distributors like Michael Klinger and Tony Tenser's Compton Group in the making and release of sexploitation films during the Swinging Sixties. Lucy Bolton examines the representation of middle-aged women's sexual desires from a wide chronological angle, the late 1950s through the early 1970s, in X certificate films such as *Room at the Top*, *The Roman Spring of Mrs Stone* (José Quintero 1961) and *Zee & Co*. Each film presents the lives of women subjected to social criticism, rejection and ridicule for expressing yearnings deemed, at the time, to be taboo for women of their age. These portraits are contrasted with Shelley Winters's trailblazing performance as Ruby in *Alfie*, where she garners respect for expressing and revelling in carnal desires that are off-limits to her female contemporaries. In order to understand the complexities surrounding the cultural reactions to middle-aged women's sexuality, Bolton turns to BBFC discussions, critical reviews and scholarship related to the star personas of Winters, Vivien Leigh, Simone Signoret and Elizabeth Taylor.

While Luckett and Bolton show the yearnings and challenges for women of all ages in the 1960s, Claire Henry's chapter suggests how female characters challenged (and rarely yearned for) male authority figures in Hammer's 'Karnstein trilogy' of lesbian vampire films *The Vampire Lovers*

(Roy Ward Baker 1970), *Lust for a Vampire* (Jimmy Sangster 1971) and *Twins of Evil* (John Hough 1971). She analyses how the studio took full advantage of the BBFC's new willingness to permit them to synthesize nudity and sexual content into their Gothic horror films. While much of the attention during this period was on the escalating number of X certificate films combining elements of sex and violence, Henry demonstrates how the sensationalistic scenes of lesbianism in the films raised the ire of the BBFC and, in the process, became instrumental in the emergence of the lesbian vampire subgenre. The BBFC's leniency can also be detected in *10 Rillington Place* (Richard Fleischer 1971). Tim Snelson explores how this dramatization of the gruesome exploits of London serial killer John Christie was made possible after a decade-long series of contentious negotiations with the BBFC, which resulted in the Board changing its long-standing policy about films drawing directly on real crime and court cases from the last fifty years. Snelson outlines the production histories of both *10 Rillington Place* and previous unmade films about the Christie murders, and contextualizes these projects within the discourse surrounding the death penalty and the notorious Moors murders in the 1960s. Benjamin Halligan's chapter closes the collection with an examination of the BBFC's transfer of power from Trevelyan to Stephen Murphy in 1971. This period saw the Board under intense scrutiny from both the Christian pressure group, the Festival of Light, and other conservative commentators due to the X certificates that were being granted to a number of controversial films boasting unprecedented levels of sex, violence and horror. Halligan argues that the BBFC's frequent interference with horror films during the pre-production, production, post-production and release stages was ultimately instrumental in changing the character of the films themselves.

As cinematically suggested in Kubrick's *Lolita* when Humbert Humbert holds the hands of both the frightened teenage Lolita and her middle-aged mother as they watch the monstrous Christopher Lee strangle Peter Cushing in Hammer's *The Curse of Frankenstein* (Terence Fisher 1957), the decade's fascination with British cinema depicting sex, violence and horror would cut across generational divides. As audiences matured in the long 1960s, the limits of the objectionable shifted as did the barometer indicated by the BBFC certification system. This collection of chapters is an attempt at assessing how the X certificate functioned and identified a cluster of films 'for adults only' ranging from – and at times blurring boundaries between – the socially acceptable to the perverse. The demand for X certificate entertainment, sometimes enabled, sometimes mitigated, sometimes fumbled, sometimes shirked, sometimes blocked by the BBFC, was to make for, and shape, a decisive, generative moment in British cinema history. We read the interplay of conflicting desires, fears and hopes for the future as a major element of the enduring allure, and richness, of British X cinema of the long 1960s – coalescing into, as the trailer for Antonioni's decade-defining *Blow-Up* puts

it, ‘a world where the beautiful and the bizarre take on new forms and hold new fascinations’.

Notes

- 1 In some respects, one could argue that Trevelyan re-aligned the X certificate to this type of filmmaking in the wake of both Hammer Films and Raymond Stross’s production *The Flesh Is Weak*, which Christopher Weedman discusses in Chapter 2. Steve Chibnall discusses how the X certificate was originally envisioned as a mechanism to release reputable international films in cinemas in metropolitan cities: ‘The certificate was conceived primarily as a means of allowing the metropolitan exhibition of a relatively small number of what we would now term “arthouse” films for specialist educated audiences, and eleven of the first dozen “X” certificates awarded were to continental films’ (2012: 35).
- 2 The lack of films closely associated with Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (or even the West Country) in our focus on British cinema suggests that this emergent society was associated, by filmmakers and the film industry, with the English metropolitan regions and their immediate hinterlands. Folk Horror films of this period, fewer in quantity, and which did tend to look to areas beyond the metropolitan hinterlands and the English borders, embraced sometimes problematic notions of enclaves of society that were stubbornly refusing to emerge into the present, as most notably with the primitive culture of religious practices in *The Wicker Man* (Robin Hardy 1973). On Folk Horror, see Adam Scovell (2017).
- 3 A similar refusal to demarcate a period within the turns of decades, in favour of acknowledging the lived experience of that period, is apparent in Jonathon Green’s pioneering project of curating the voices of the ‘English Underground’, which bleeds into 1971 (1988). Since then, numerous academic studies have identified ‘the long 1960s’ as a more appropriately expansive or discursive way of bookending their concerns. In terms of the elongation of the 1960s, in respect to the ongoing reverberations and legacies of the 1960s beyond the 1960s, we acknowledge Sarah Hill’s model of cultural history too (2016), as well as Alain Badiou’s critique of ‘shutting down’ a period, and so curtailing or defanging its meanings and importance, via a process of historicization: ‘We are still the contemporaries of May ’68’ (2010: 41). Moreover, there is some evidence that cinemagoers of this period recognized the elongation of themes and concerns beyond just the turn of the decade, and so felt ‘the sixties’ could not be confined to a numerical definition (see Stokes, Jones, and Pett 2022: 175).
- 4 Additional relevant scholarship and popular criticism on British cinema from the late 1950s through the mid-1970s includes Terence Kelly, Graham Norton, and George Perry (1966); Ernest Betts (1973); Alexander Walker (1974 and 1985); Roy Armes (1978); Charles Barr (1986); Robert Murphy (1992); Brian McFarlane (1997); Anthony Aldgate, James Chapman, and

Arthur Marwick (2000); Justine Ashby and Andrew Higson (2000); Matthew Sweet (2005); B. F. Taylor (2006); Robert Shail (2008); Sue Harper and Justin Smith (2012); Sian Barber (2013); I. Q. Hunter (2013); and Paul Newland (2013). Scholarship on censorship and the British cinema during these years also includes studies from Neville March Hunnings (1967), Guy Phelps (1975), James C. Robertson (1993), Tom Dewe Mathews (1994), Aldgate and Robertson (2005) and Edward Lamberti (2012).

- 5 Interestingly, X certificate films were not the only films with scandalous reputations. According to a former cinema patron named ‘Chester’, there was a proscribed sexual subculture surrounding the screening of some A certificate films during this period. Chester recalls that ‘[i]n the days of “A” certificate films, it was quite commonplace for young boys to stand outside the cinema and ask a stranger going in if he would take them with him. For some men who fancied young boys, this was an ideal opportunity to sit alongside the boy in the darkness and grope him sexually ... it happened to me on a couple of occasions ... when I was 12 and 13 respectively’ (cited in Stokes, Jones, and Pett 2022: 45).
- 6 Trevelyan further explains that any licensing authority maintains ‘the legal right ... to reverse or vary any decision made by the Board. In practice local authority action affects only a very small number of films each year, the decisions of the Board being generally accepted’ (1967: 127).
- 7 Historically, the BBFC also worked to ‘protect’ impressionable groups other than children, so that another principle also may have been in play – as with, as Robertson argues, the BBFC’s moves to restrict access to Soviet films by British workers in the 1920s (1993: 27–31). This type of safeguarding is similarly evident in the BBFC’s cutting of martial arts films due to the examiners’ fears of juvenile copycat violence, as seen in their handling of the American-Hong Kong co-production *Enter the Dragon* (Robert Clouse 1973) (see Simkin 2012: 79–80).
- 8 Trevelyan, with wine and cigarette, is pictured between Warhol and Morrissey in the photo section between pp. 128–9. The caption reads ‘a talk with [them] helped me to understand their approach to film-making’.
- 9 Famously, *Room at the Top*, discussed by Lucy Bolton in Chapter 9, reached the BBFC as a near completed film, carefully avoiding scrutiny of the script (see Aldgate 1995: 35, 43).
- 10 Geoffrey’s homosexuality was disputed by Melvin (Griffiths 2006: 88, endnote 16), and indeed Geoffrey’s persona and timbre does not seem so distant from Melvin’s own, suggesting that he was not proactively performing a homosexual character. Weedman has argued that the critical distance that allowed Losey (an exiled American) to explore the subtle changes in British society in *The Servant* – both social and sexual – arose from Losey’s unencumbered outsider status and so sharper perspective (2019: 93–9). On *Victim* and the BBFC, see Hargreaves (2012: 57–9).
- 11 *Death in Venice* concerns unrequited same-sex paedophilic desire, although was taken as a ‘gay film’ at the time; on this, and the film’s problematic co-options and afterlife, see Halligan (2022: 257).