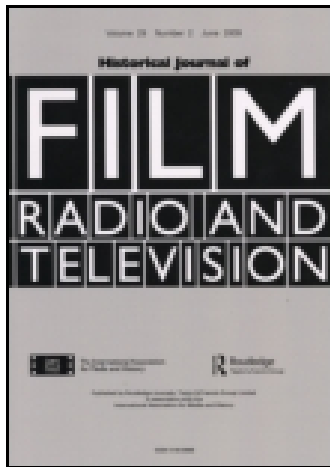


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RESEARCH NOTE

Children, 'Horrific' Films, and Censorship in 1930s Britain

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Research on cinema culture in Britain in the 1930s reveals that young people's filmgoing was widely regarded as an issue of the most pressing social concern [1]. While such anxieties are recurrent in the history of cinema and other popular media, this period saw the emergence and evolution of a rather distinctive set of constructions of the child cinema audience. These were produced to a significant extent through strategies aimed at regulating films and their exhibition.

The early 1930s saw a rise in the public profile of the activities of the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC) and its system of film classification, as well as of film exhibitors' policing of children's access to certain types of films. These pressures centred around a cycle of Hollywood films which came to acquire the label 'horrific' and surrounding which an unprecedented set of events unfolded involving the BBFC, the government, a number of pressure groups, and the film industry itself.

From the earliest years of cinema, the effects of the medium on children had been the subject of considerable public concern. This was centred at first on cinema's supposed physical ill-effects—damage to eyesight, fatigue, and so on—as well as on its potential for 'demoralizing' children and the working class [2]. However, the 1930s saw a new focus for anxieties about young people's cinemagoing, now directed less at cinema's negative effects and increasingly on what was held to be good for children and on how cinema might detract from, or even make a positive contribution to, child welfare.

In the period from around 1930 to 1933, the government was subjected to pressures from numerous quarters to reform the existing system of film censorship and/or to regulate children's cinemagoing activities. During the last weeks of 1929, the Home Office had issued a circular letter on 'The cinema and children' to all the local authorities in England and Wales with responsibility for issuing licences to cinemas. Cinema licences were aimed largely at ensuring safety in premises where films were shown, but regulation of the contents of films had been part of licensing authorities' remit since the legal requirement that cinema premises be licensed had first come into effect in 1909: the Home Office was (and remains) the government department responsible for overseeing the licensing at local level of places of public entertainment.

The 1929 circular explained the system of film classification which had been developed by the BBFC, a nongovernmental body with advisory rather than legal powers: 'U' films were those passed by the Board for universal exhibition, while 'A' films were those passed as suitable for persons above the age of 16. The circular advised

local authorities to adopt the BBFC's scheme of certification and to make it a condition of granting cinema licences that under 16s would not be admitted to 'A' films unless accompanied by a *bona fide* adult guardian; and that the categories of the films on exhibition would be clearly displayed both inside and outside the cinema [3]. This in effect was recognition of a perceived need to exercise especially careful control over the nature of films shown to children, and the Home Office expressed the view that the BBFC's scheme of film classification 'has done all that could be reasonably expected ... to protect the interests of young people', but that in the end it was up to licensing authorities to see that it was enforced.

Originally circulated only to local licensing authorities, this circular was made available to the general public in May 1931. The intervening 18 months had seen heated public debates about children's cinemagoing, as well as mounting pressure on the government to reform the existing system of censorship. Meanwhile, a number of local authorities were very publicly flouting the BBFC's recommendations and independently exercising their legal powers of censorship. In October 1930, the decision of the Liverpool licensing authority to exclude all under-16s from 'A' films, whether accompanied by adults or not, received nationwide publicity and became the subject of a test case aimed at determining the degree and the limits of local licensing authorities' powers of censorship [4]. In the ensuing period, numerous other authorities followed Liverpool's lead. Writing about children and the cinema at the end of the decade, Richard Ford looks back to 'an epidemic of local censorship' during the early 1930s [5].

At the same time, pressure group activity around the 'problem' of children's cinemagoing was mounting. In April 1930, the BBFC received a deputation from the London Public Morality Council, urging greater clarity in the advertising of film categories, expressing general concern about 'sordid themes' in films, and calling for the production and promotion of films suitable for children. In July, the Parliamentary Film Committee asked the Home Secretary to appoint a committee of inquiry into film censorship; and in the same month the Birmingham branch of the National Council of Women made a private visit to the Home Secretary to discuss an investigation they had conducted on children's cinema matinees in their city [6]. In November 1930, the Birmingham Cinema Inquiry Committee (BCIC), a body which was to become particularly vociferous on the issue of children's cinemagoing, held a meeting at which concern was voiced about the exposure of children and adolescents to films that were unsuitable for them. It was agreed to mount a petition to the Home Office calling for a committee of inquiry into film censorship [7].

This was certainly an embattled start to the new decade for both the government and the BBFC, and 1931 was an *annus horribilis* for all concerned. BBFC President Edward Shortt began the year with an attempt to take some heat out of the debate, issuing a warning to the film trade that films showing a 'continuous succession of prolonged and gross brutality and sordid themes' would no longer be certificated [8]. Throughout 1931, the key pressure groups stepped up their activities by conducting their own investigations into children's cinemagoing and the 'A' films question. In February, the Public Morality Council (PMC) launched an inquiry into the extent of local authority adoption of the recommendations on 'A' films set out in the 1929 circular, and its report was published in October.

The PMC discovered that while the majority of cinema licensing authorities routinely accepted the BBFC's decisions on film certificates, few of them were requiring cinemas to display the categories of films on exhibition. Four in ten authorities claimed that it was difficult in practice to enforce the exclusion of unaccompanied under-16s from 'A'

films, particularly in view of the widespread practice of children asking strangers to 'take them in' [9]. In May the BCIC published the findings of its own investigation of children's cinemagoing, and continued pressing for a public inquiry, sending further deputations to the Home Office during 1931 and 1932 (in the interval between these two visits, Herbert Samuel, who had been instrumental in launching the BBFC in 1909, became Home Secretary [10]). In 1931, reports of inquiries into children's cinema and film censorship were published also by Sheffield Social Survey; Birkenhead Vigilance Committee; the National Council of Women; and the Mothers' Union [11]. The Home Office's decision to publish the December 1929 'Cinema and children' circular was made in response to these and other pressures.

Some of the pressure groups were more supportive of existing arrangements than others. The BCIC took the toughest line of all, but their repeated calls for a public inquiry went unheeded. By May 1931, when representatives of this body called on the Home Secretary with a petition calling for a committee of inquiry into 'the undesirable nature of many of the films shown in picture houses' and pressing for the total exclusion of under 16s from 'A' films [12], another course of action had already been decided upon. In January, the London PMC had held a private conference on cinema, calling not for a full-scale public inquiry but for the appointment of a small consultative committee on film censorship [13]. Nor were the Mothers' Union and the National Council of Women in favour of any wholesale change to the system of film censorship: in its May 1931 'Report of an inquiry into film censorship', the NCW recommended the establishment of a consultative committee which would keep the BBFC in touch with the various interested parties and look into the question of 'A' films and children [14]. In fact, the Home Office had already begun the process of setting up such a committee, and in November 1931 the newly convened Film Censorship Consultative Committee (FCCC) held its first meeting [15]. While the establishment of this committee certainly did not put an end to pressures on the Home Office and the BBFC, it did mean that there was now a ready answer to any subsequent pressure group demands for government action.

Concerns around children's cinemagoing initially met worries about the conduct of film censorship in calls for cleaning up films with 'sordid themes'; and it was only in 1932 that the issue of 'frightening films' moved to the forefront of debate. The BCIC had been the first to draw attention to this issue, when one of the speakers at its November 1930 conference made passing reference to 'the fear element' as a cause for concern in films seen by children; and in its inquiry, children had been asked about their responses to 'frightening pictures'. Nonetheless, it was not until well into 1931, with the UK releases of *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*, that a new cycle of horror talkies from Hollywood began to make its presence felt in Britain. In a conference hosted by the BCIC early in 1932, there is mention of *Frankenstein* (which the BBFC had passed with some cuts the year before) and of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (passed 'A' with major cuts in 1932). At this point the films are called 'thrillers' [16].

In April 1932, the FCCC took up discussion of complaints about *Frankenstein*, noting that a number of licensing authorities had taken independent steps to restrict admission to the film. The Committee then considered a range of policy options [17]. When the question came up again in its October meeting, the committee agreed that there ought to be some arrangement whereby exhibitors would be notified of films which the BBFC considered entirely unsuitable for children, so that they—exhibitors—might 'continue to warn the public of "horrific" films by methods similar to those adopted in the case of ... "Frankenstein"' [18]. At the end of the year the committee

produced an internal report which looked at arrangements for limiting children's access to 'A' films in general and also named several 'horror' [sic] films.

The arrangement proposed was that the FCCC secretary should keep a list of 'horrific' films to pass on to the Cinematography Exhibitors' Association (CEA), which would then in turn ask its members to post notices outside cinemas when such films were showing, warning parents not to bring in their children. This report in essence formed the text of a new Home Office circular, 'Children and "A" films', which was distributed in March 1933 [19]. The FCCC's proposals are endorsed in the BBFC's Annual Report for 1932, which was published after the distribution of the circular and which discussed the 'horror' [sic] film for the first time. The additional restrictions on admitting children to 'horrific' films were purely advisory, however, and exhibitors were not obliged to impose them. In any case, the final decision as to whether or not to bring children into the cinema was deliberately left up to parents. Inclusion of film titles on the 'horrific' list appears to have been somewhat erratic, and in any case at this point all such films, if they passed the Censor, were given 'A' certificates. All this, coupled with differences in interpretation and enforcement of the general 'A' films condition about under-16s, provided enormous leeway for local variation in enforcement practices. While at one extreme under-16s were totally excluded from 'A' films in some areas, in others children could easily gain admittance to any and every film that came to the locality.

Frightening films appear to have first acquired the 'horrific' label in the Autumn of 1932; and calls for clarification of the term inevitably followed. In June 1933, London County Council, an authority which regularly took a leading role in film censorship policy making, offered what was to become the standard definition of a 'horrific' film: 'one likely to frighten or horrify children under the age of 16 years' [20]. The definition of a film genre in terms not of its themes or iconographies but of the responses it is likely to provoke in a particular audience is interesting, and in this case was to have significant consequences.

A few months after the publication of 'Children and "A" films', the frenzy of pressure group activity around children, 'A' films, and frightening films had largely died down, though the remaining years of the decade saw some activity on the part of certain local licensing authorities around 'horrific' films: this took the form of trying to exclude under-16s altogether from these films, of banning them outright, or of imposing exceptional restrictions on entry to individual pictures [21]. In 1936, Hollywood producers of 'horrific' films responded to criticisms from Britain and elsewhere by temporarily reducing their output. But when the newly appointed BBFC President, Lord Tyrrell of Avon, attempted to 'kill' the 'horrific' category in the same year, he was obliged to back down [22]. An obligatory 'H' certificate was introduced as late as 1937, but it was rarely used and was withdrawn in 1951. By the late 1930s, in any case, the tenor of public opinion about children's cinemagoing had undergone significant changes, with ideas about young people's psychological vulnerability to 'unsuitable' films giving way to calls for films produced and programmed especially for children.

In 1936, the British Film Institute (BFI) made a high-profile bid to shift the terms of the debate, first of all by hosting a conference on Children and the Cinema. Speakers pointed out that only a small minority of commercial cinemas were offering special weekly matinees for children and that children's preferences for films with movement, action, moral outcomes, heroic deeds, and happy endings were not being catered for. It was consequently resolved to look at the potential for putting together programmes of films specifically for children and presenting these at special children's performances

in mainstream cinemas [23]. The BFI subsequently produced the first in a series of lists of films recommended for such performances; and this fresh direction in thinking about the young cinema audience also inspired further debate and renewed inquiry into children's cinemagoing habits and preferences [24]. From these beginnings, organized children's cinema matinees and film clubs developed rapidly. Thus, after about 1936, the notion of the child's specific needs in the cinema gained impetus and led to increasing pressures for a child-centred approach to film programming. In Britain, the pressure group activities around film censorship that took place in 1930 and 1931 were largely about the meaning and enforcement of the 'A' certificate, and produced a conceptualization of the young cinema audience as a group for whom certain films were 'unsuitable' by virtue of being morally or psychologically harmful or simply inappropriate at a particular stage of mental development. This development is associated with the naming of a new type of film, deemed unsuitable for children because it was 'frightening'. The 'horrific' film emerged towards the end of 1932 in response to a cycle of Hollywood talkies released in Britain in the early 1930s, and was defined not in terms of the films' contents—their stories, their characters, even their iconographies—but in relation to the *response* they generated (fear) and the *audience* (children) in which it was generated. Specifically, the 'horrific' film was the product of a debate about the meaning of the 'A' and the 'U' classifications *in relation to the child audience*. This debate touched on the question of parental rights and responsibilities in choosing the films children should see; on the problem of non-*bona fide* guardians taking children into 'A' films; and on the issue of what was and was not a film suitable for children. As the 'fear element' came to the fore, concern shifted away from unsuitable contents ('sordid themes', mainly around sex and crime) and towards inappropriate or undesirable audience reactions and responses. In the late 1930s, this concern with the child audience and its responses shaded into positive efforts to promote films aimed at, and suitable for, children.

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NOTES

- [1] Annette Kuhn, *An Everyday Magic: cinema and cultural memory* (London, 2002), Chapter 4. My thanks to Ian Conrich and Sarah Smith for sharing ideas and sources.
- [2] Annette Kuhn, *Cinema, Censorship and Sexuality, 1909–1925* (London, 1988), pp. 120–122. On the role of local cinema licensing authorities, see Kuhn, *Cinema, Censorship and Sexuality*, Chapter 2; and Sian Lewis, 'Local authorities and the control of film exhibition in Britain in the interwar period', *Journal of Popular British Cinema*, No. 3 (2000), pp. 113–120.
- [3] Home Office (HO) circular, The cinema and children, 537, 492/3, 16 December 1929.
- [4] Fawcett Library, National Vigilance Association Archive, S.1s, Cinema Censorship; Public Record Office (PRO), HO45/14731/68, local ban upheld by justices, January 1931.
- [5] Richard Ford, *Children in the Cinema* (London, 1939), p. 92.
- [6] British Film Institute Special Collections (BFI), BBFC Verbatim Reports, 1930–31 bound volume, Deputation to BBFC from London PMC, 3 April 1930; BFI, BBFC Verbatim Reports, 1930–38 folder, Deputation from Parliamentary Film Committee to Home Secretary, 15 July 1930; PRO, HO45/14275/51, NCW report of visit to Home Office, July 1930.
- [7] BFI, BBFC Verbatim Reports, bound volume 1930–31, notes on a meeting convened by Birmingham Cinema Inquiry Committee, 7 November 1930; also in PRO, HO45/14275/64. Verbatim reports were commissioned by the BBFC.

- [8] PRO, HO45/14276/67, circular letter from BBFC, 1 January 1931.
- [9] BFI, BBFC Verbatim Reports, 1930–38 folder, PMC report on cinema films, 29 October 1931.
- [10] PRO, HO45/14276/84, Deputation from BCIC, 8 May 1931; PRO, HO45/15206/43, Deputation from BCIC, 6 April 1932.
- [11] PRO, HO45/14731/91, Sheffield Social Survey Committee inquiry into children's cinema matinees, July 1931; Birkenhead Vigilance Committee, *A Report of Investigations, June–October 1931* (Birkenhead, 1931); PRO, HO45/14277/103, National Council of Women, Report of an inquiry into film censorship, May 1931, PRO, HO45/14277/124, Mothers' Union, 'Moral Influence of Cinema Films', July 1931.
- [12] See PRO, HO45/14276/84 and PRO, HO45/14276/92 for details of BCIC deputation, 8 May 1931; BFI, BBFC Verbatim report of BCIC deputation, 8 May 1931; PRO, HO45/14276/92A, reply to BCIC request for public inquiry, 10 July 1931.
- [13] PRO, HO45/14275/59, Summary of proceedings of LPMC private conference, 12 January 1931; also in BFI, BBFC Verbatim Reports, bound volume 1930–31.
- [14] PRO, HO45/14277/103, National Council of Women, Report of an Inquiry into Film Censorship, May 1931.
- [15] PRO, HO45/14276/75, Proposed consultative committee, February 1931; PRO, HO45/15208/1, notes on first meeting of FCCC, 26 November 1931.
- [16] BFI, BBFC Verbatim Reports, 1932–35 bound volume, BCIC National Conference on Problems Connected with the Cinema, 27 February 1932.
- [17] PRO, HO45/15208/41, Minutes of 4th meeting of FCCC, 4 April 1932.
- [18] PRO, HO45/15208/35, Minutes of 7th meeting of FCCC, 10 October 1932.
- [19] PRO, HO45/17036/20, FCCC report to Home Office on Children and 'A' Films, 21 December 1932; HO circular, Children and 'A' films, 596,323/20, 6 March 1933.
- [20] PRO, HO45/17036/58, LCC minutes, 20 June 1933.
- [21] For example, PRO, HO45/14731/94, Liverpool, January 1931; PRO, HO45/17036/2, Dorset, February 1932; PRO, HO45/17036/11, Bridgewater, Somerset, May 1932; *Kinematograph Weekly*, 7 September 1933 (Birmingham); *Kinematograph Weekly*, 16 November 1933 (St Helens); *Today's Cinema*, 1 November 1935 (London County Council, Middlesex County Council); *Today's Cinema*, 2 November 1935 (Devon, Cornwall); *Kinematograph Weekly*, 7 November 1935 (Exeter); *Today's Cinema*, 4 December 1935 (Surrey County Council); *Today's Cinema*, 13 January 1936 (Torquay); *Today's Cinema*, 22 January 1936 (Margate); *Daily Film Review*, 7 December 1936 (Essex County Council); *Today's Cinema*, 19 December 1939 (Margate). See also Ian Conrich, 'Horrific films and 1930s British cinema', in S. Chibnall and J. Petley (eds), *British Horror Cinema* (London, 2001).
- [22] Frank J. dello Stritto, The British 'ban' on horror films of 1937, *Cult Movies*, 14 (1995), p. 26; 'Film Censorship Today', speech to CEA, 24 June 1936; *Today's Cinema*, 31 July 1936, 8 August 1936, 23 September 1936.
- [23] William Farr, 'Films for Children—Plea for Co-Operation', *Cinematograph Times*, 12 September (1936); British Film Institute, 'Report of the Conference on Films for Children, November 20th and 21st, 1936', in *Films for Children* (London, 1936); PRO, HO45/17036/96, BFI conference on films for children, November 1936.
- [24] British Film Institute, *Films for Children: a first list of films recommended for special performances for children in cinema* (London, 1937); PRO, HO45/21118/22, Odeon Theatres report on children and the cinema, October 1938; William Farr, 'Analysis of questionnaire to adolescents 14–18 years' (London, 1939); Richard Ford, *Children in the Cinema*.

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