

# The Hidden

# CINEMA



**BRITISH FILM  
CENSORSHIP  
IN ACTION,  
1913-1975**

**JAMES C. ROBERTSON**

ROUTLEDGE



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# The Hidden Cinema

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James C. Robertson



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## General editor's preface

The pre-eminent popular art form of the first half of the twentieth century has been the cinema. Both in Europe and America from the turn of the century to the 1950s cinema-going has been a regular habit and film-making a major industry. The cinema combined all the other art forms—painting, sculpture, music, the word, the dance—and added a new dimension—an illusion of life. Living, breathing people enacted dramas before the gaze of the audience and not, as in the theatre, bounded by the stage, but with the world as their backdrop. Success at the box office was to be obtained by giving the people something to which they could relate and which therefore reflected themselves. Like the other popular art forms, the cinema has much to tell us about people and their beliefs, their assumptions and their attitudes, their hopes and fears and dreams.

This series of books will examine the connection between films and the societies which produced them. Film as straight historical evidence; film as an unconscious reflection of national preoccupations, film as escapist entertainment; film as a weapon of propaganda—these are the aspects of the question that will concern us. We shall seek to examine and delineate individual film *genres*, the cinematic images of particular nations and the work of key directors who have mirrored national concerns and ideals. For we believe that the rich and multifarious products of the cinema constitute a still largely untapped source of knowledge about the ways in which our world and the people in it have changed since the first flickering images were projected on to the silver screen.

Jeffrey Richards

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The film stills are reproduced by courtesy of the Stills Division of the National Film Archive. The permission of copyright holders to quote is acknowledged with gratitude in every case.

For this edition I have incorporated developments since the first edition, corrected some errors, and added the very important case of *Last Tango in Paris*.

July 1992

# Abbreviations

ABPC	Associated British Picture Corporation
BBFC	British Board of Film Censors
BFI	British Film Institute
CEA	Cinematograph Exhibitors Association
GLC	Greater London Council
LCC	London County Council
MGM	Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer
MCC	Middlesex County Council
NCPM	National Council of Public Morals
NFA	National Film Archive
NFT	National Film Theatre
SCC	Surrey County Council
TCF	20th Century-Fox



# Introduction

In *The British Board of Film Censors: Film Censorship in Britain, 1896–1950*, published in 1985, the author followed several other writers in drawing attention to the hostility of the police and of the privileged to the cinema's emerging popularity among the British working class during the early years of this century and in tracing the detailed events leading to film censorship.

The first purpose-built cinema appeared in 1906, after which cinemas mushroomed throughout the country to approximately 1,600 by 1910 and 3,500 by 1916. By the middle of the First World War weekly attendance was estimated at twenty million, mostly working class, many of the cinemas being located in the industrial cities and towns, and as early as February 1909 the home office had come under Metropolitan Police pressure to control film content because many films allegedly glorified crime. The culmination of this pressure and propertied-class anxiety was the 1909 Cinematograph Act, ostensibly a safety measure against fire.

This act required local authorities to issue licences to cinemas as a sign that the latter had carried out adequate safety precautions, but it was not long before local councillors were using these new mandatory powers to censor film content. In such policies the courts, themselves under propertied-class influence, invariably supported the local authorities after December 1910. By 1912 local authority pressure upon film content was sufficiently strong for all sections of the film industry—distributors, exhibitors, and producers—to fear an imposed central government censorship, as some local authorities were advocating. To pre-empt such a move, the film industry itself approached the government and obtained the approval of Home Secretary Reginald McKenna for the establishment of the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC) as the industry's self-censorship body with effect from 1 March 1913.

The BBFC carried no legal status, its function being to either classify or cut or reject the films submitted to it. At its head was a president, while it was to be administered by a secretary, assisted by four censors. To guarantee its independence of the film industry, the BBFC was to levy fees based upon the footage of the submitted films. The BBFC decided to categorize films with either an 'A' (adult) or 'U' (universal) certificate (cut

or uncut) or to withhold a certificate altogether. The award of a certificate denoted merely that a film was suitable for adults only ('A') or for both adults and children ('U'). This was designed only as a guide to the local authorities which retained the statutory power either to allow a film which the BBFC had rejected or to ban a film which the BBFC had passed. This film industry self-censorship system covered only feature films in theory and no producer was legally obliged to submit films to the BBFC, although most producers apparently promised to do so during the 1912 film industry/ Home Office talks which led to the foundation of the BBFC. The Home Office in 1912 declined to participate openly in the appointment of BBFC staff.

From 1913 to the early 1970s the BBFC rejected more than 500 feature films. It subsequently allowed some of these, but the great majority remained in effect banned, except in a further handful of cases where local authorities overrode the BBFC. The 500 plus features were fairly evenly distributed over the more than 60 years covered in this book. G.A.Redford was the first BBFC president until his death in November 1916, by which time the number of such films had already exceeded 60. Under T.P. O'Connor, Redford's successor, until his death in November 1929, approximately another 100 films were added to this total, while during Edward Shortt's six-year presidency in the early 'talkie' period the number was further expanded by more than 100 films. Lord Tyrrell of Avon's presidency from 1935 to 1947 saw an increase of only slightly more than 20, but this was followed by another steep rise of more than 100 during the presidency of Sir Sidney Harris which lasted until 1960. Lord Morrison of Lambeth's five-year presidency then produced another 70 rejections, followed by a further 50 plus in the early years of Lord Harlech's presidency which ended tragically in February 1985 when he was killed in a car crash.

Only during Tyrrell's presidency, which embraced the special circumstances of the Second World War, was the number of rejected films kept very low, less than 2 per year on average. This contrasts with an average of more than 9 per year from 1913 to 1971. However, it is in part misleading to equate the rejected films statistics with the various presidents, for they viewed films only when called upon to do so after the individual BBFC censors—two viewed and reported upon every film—disagreed and the secretary still harboured doubts. The secretary was a full-time official, completely immersed in daily administrative routine, whereas the president was part-time and usually combined his duties with other activities. This situation inevitably placed the *de facto*, if not the public, responsibility upon the secretary for particular decisions, although this reality was not overtly acknowledged at the BBFC until the clashes between John Trevelyan and Lord Morrison in the early 1960s.

From 1913 to 1948 the secretary was Joseph Brooke Wilkinson, whose long reign roughly coincided with the rise of the cinema as the prime mass-

communication medium in the pre-television age. His successors into the 1970s were Arthur Watkins (1948–57), John Nicholls (1957–8), John Trevelyan (1959–71) and Stephen Murphy (1971–5). Under Wilkinson, who until comparatively recently has been a shadowy figure and remains so to some extent, the rejected films reached almost 320, under Watkins about 50, under Nicholls about 20, and under Trevelyan over 150. These figures average approximately 10, 6, 10, and 12 per year respectively—none of them large when offset against the total number viewed at the BBFC throughout the whole period. For example, in Trevelyan's term of office the BBFC viewed more than 16,000 features, the rejects comprising less than 1 per cent. Even this trifling percentage was higher than the equivalent for each of his three predecessors.

In its early days the BBFC was often criticized by local authorities for being too liberal, and in 1916 it only narrowly escaped extinction at the hands of Home Secretary Sir Herbert Samuel, who at that time (but not later) favoured a central government censorship. Some local authority disquiet continued until the Home Office in the mid-1920s painstakingly managed to establish film censorship uniformity between the BBFC and the local authorities. After that right-wing pressure groups spasmodically sniped at the BBFC until the mid-1970s, while parallel criticism also emerged during the late 1920s from the left. At first this came mainly from intellectuals rather than politicians, so that the BBFC was able to avoid much of the crossfire. But pressure from the left slowly built up under the impact of international events centring upon the policies of Hitler and Mussolini. In April 1936 film censorship became directly involved in British party politics for the first time when the three-minute propaganda *Peace of Britain*, which attacked the government's rearmament policy and specifically invited viewers to write to their MPs in this respect, was submitted to the BBFC. The film was held back for a short time before the BBFC finally allowed it, possibly as the result of political pressure and adverse publicity. This affair, prominently covered by the *News Chronicle* and *Daily Herald* in particular, led novelist J.B. Priestley in *The Star* of 3 July 1936 to advocate the production of a politically radical British film in order to test the BBFC's political sympathies, but no British studio followed up his suggestion. Dissatisfaction with the BBFC persisted from the political centre and left as well as from the cinematic and literary intelligentsia, with George Bernard Shaw and H.G. Wells as pugnacious as Priestley. This eventually culminated in a House of Commons debate of 7 December 1938 when Liberal MP Geoffrey Mander forcefully charged the BBFC with pro-government political censorship through its contacts with government departments against an international background of mounting belligerence from Germany, Italy, and Japan.

Although the government predictably denied Mander's accusation, after the debate the BBFC relaxed some of its previous rigidity over politically controversial material before the outbreak of war in September 1939.

However, the growing 1930s criticisms had not brought about any fundamental structural change in film censorship, for after a few years of uncomfortable relations between the BBFC and certain local authorities in the late 1920s and early 1930s, the system had from 1934 settled down again into its mid-1920s stability. Moreover, most of the vociferous intellectual and political critics favoured censorship for the masses in principle and had sought simply to open the BBFC door a trifle for the benefit of a small middle—and upper-class clientele. The Second World War diverted attention from the subject, while since 1945 the sporadic public criticism of film censorship has usually been concentrated upon individual films rather than the validity of that censorship or its structure within a parliamentary democracy. Furthermore, the BBFC's chief critics, unlike their 1930s counterparts, demanded a more stringent rather than a more liberal censorship. As the BBFC gradually abandoned most of its pre-war policies during the 1950s and 1960s, nudity, conventional sex, homosexuality, lesbianism, drug-taking, ever more bloody violence, and rape were all passed in one form or another by the early 1970s as cinema-going in Britain steadily declined through the cinema's failure to fend off television's challenge. This marked change of emphasis in screen fare provided conservative critics, including some local authorities, with ammunition to fire at the BBFC, a trend which received much impetus from the June 1970 Conservative general election victory. In the late 1950s and throughout the 1960s propaganda features in entertainment guise critical of various aspects of British life were relatively few and far between and thus attracted much less concern from the right-wing. All the same, by the early 1970s the BBFC stood in much the same position in relation to the British right as in the late 1920s and early 1930s, although this time the progressives by and large remained silent since their predecessors' 1930s grievances had long since been remedied.

Under Wilkinson the BBFC had shrouded itself in a secrecy which broke down only slightly and haphazardly until Trevelyan became secretary in 1959. He was the first secretary who had previously served as a BBFC censor, and he accelerated the more open policy inaugurated by Watkins, although he did not restore the pre-war practice of published annual reports and some secrecy was retained, particularly over the identity of the censors. These developments have created difficulties for historians, intensified by the fact that most of the early BBFC records were destroyed by enemy action in May 1941. However, the vast majority of the 1930–49 preproduction scenarios survive, as do the registers of films allowed and rejected. While the latter are not now as complete as one would wish, they nevertheless constitute an extremely valuable source of information when complemented by the scenarios, now lodged in the British Film Institute (BFI) library, film periodicals, press reviews, and the records of both the BFI and the National Film Archive (NFA). Naturally the films themselves are all important, in which respect the work of the NFA in acquiring and

preserving films since 1935 has placed film and social historians immeasurably in its debt for all time.

Post-1913 British film censorship has functioned at four levels—within the BBFC, within the production companies themselves, at the local authorities, and from extra-parliamentary critics and would-be censorship reformers, with some overlap at times between them. This book comprises a random selection of films especially noteworthy from a censorship angle at one or more of these varied levels over some sixty years. In most instances the detailed content has been given in the belief that censorship can be fully understood and judged only within the context of an entire film and sometimes only within the overall political and social context as well. Some of these case histories are well-known in film folklore, others less so, while some indicate that, however desirable, undesirable, or inevitable censorship might be even in a parliamentary democracy, it has already exerted a greater influence upon film history than is often immediately apparent and will certainly continue to do so unless counteraction is promptly taken. In this sense British film censorship is ‘the hidden cinema’ of the title.

