FEATURES

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Revulsion and Derision: *Antichrist*, *The Human Centipede II* and the British Press

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(http://filmint.nu/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Cover1.jpg)

Antichrist

By **Martin Smith**.

Despite increased transparency and liberalisation at the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) in recent decades, Britain remains one of the most censorious democratic countries in the world. Annette Kuhn's model of censorship, outlined in her *Cinema, Censorship and Sexuality: 1909-1925*, details censorship as a process "produced within an array of constantly shifting discourses, practices, and apparatuses" (1988: 127) rather than simply cuts and bans imposed by censors. A large player in this process is the press.

2009 to 2012, while not producing the same kind of hysterical mass censorship and new regulation as the Video Nasties era, saw the BBFC-commissioned *Sexual and sadistic violence in films* report (Ipsos MORI 2012) and a later announcement that the Board would place harsher restrictions on violent and sexually explicit films as a result of this research (Press Association 2012). *Antichrist* (2009) and *The Human Centipede II: Full Sequence* (*HC2*, 2011) both feature in the Ipsos MORI report which also involved *The Killer Inside Me* (2010) and *A Serbian Film* (2010) and marks a recognisable end of this cycle of debate (arguably a separate cycle from the earlier "torture porn" discussion prompted by the introduction of the *Saw* [2004-] and *Hostel* [2005-] franchises).

The fates of *Antichrist* and *HC2* at the hands of the BBFC were very different: *Antichrist* was released uncut; *HC2* was refused a certificate before later being classified "18" in a censored form. With this in mind, I will look at the reception of these two films in the British national press to outline the nature of the censorship debate at this time and illustrate how the power of the press is employed in the process of censorship. An effective censorship study cannot begin and end with the press, but this approach may go some way to highlighting noteworthy aspects of an important piece of Kuhn's censorship model.

The news pieces used, including reviews, cover *Antichrist*'s 2009 premiere at Cannes up to the Ipsos MORI report in 2012 and the BBFC's announced crackdown on violent content. I will examine these materials largely in chronological order to allow a clearer picture to develop of how the debate progressed and where new ideas were introduced.

***Antichrist* at Cannes**

Antichrist's May 17th premiere at the Cannes Film Festival became an important point of reference for much of the discussion that would follow about the film. It was here defined by the extreme reactions it provoked, from the *Daily Mail*'s Baz Bamigboye (2009b) demanding von Trier "justify" his film at the press conference to Kaleem Aftab (2009) of the *Independent* who was so moved by the film that he hugged its director during an interview. The first reports from Cannes illustrate this divide in the British response well, with Bamigboye and the *Times*'s Wendy Ide (2009a) leading the attack and Mark Brown (2009) and Xan Brooks (2009) of the *Guardian* and Sukhdev Sandhu (2009) of the *Independent* praising the film, albeit in rather uncertain terms: "I think I may have enjoyed it," says Brown, while Sandhu found it "upsetting, absurd, totally deranged."

Much of the discursive terrain on which later critical debate would occur is mapped out in these first responses from May 17th and 18th. The key points of discussion are the link between the film and von Trier's publicised depression (Bradshaw 2007), accusations of misogyny, depictions of graphic violence and sex, and the notion of the film as exploitation, courting controversy to increase ticket sales, or even as an elaborate practical joke. Bamigboye (2009a) calls it "a film of startling sickness" and Ide (2009a) states that it contains "easily the most controversial image ever to be screened in competition in Cannes." Such claims for the violent and sexual content are not restricted to unfavourable coverage, either. Sandhu (2009) and Brown (2009) describe the film as extreme, while Brooks (2009), who is overwhelmed by the film, describes "an abattoir's worth of mutilation." The *Telegraph*'s Anita Singh (2009) christened *Antichrist* "[t]he most shocking film in the history of the Cannes Film Festival," a claim which would subsequently appear in much of the later British press coverage and inevitably featured on the film's poster.

(http://filmint.nu/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/antichrist3.jpg)

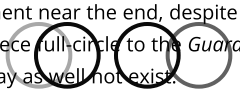
Antichrist

Singh was the first UK critic to describe the film's sex scenes as pornography in her article concerning the film's potential for conflict with the BBFC, stating that "distributors will attempt to convince the censors that its scenes of torture and pornography should be shown in their entirety." Her unfavourable portrayal of the film, drawing exclusively on negative critical reactions, not only presents the question of whether it will be passed uncut but intimates that it should not be. Singh describes the critical response as "ranging from revulsion to derision," crucially ignoring positive opinions, for example those voiced by a number of participating journalists in the film's press conference (Festival de Cannes 2009). Baz Bamigboye (2009a) shares Singh's belief that parts of the film would trouble the Board, but otherwise there is no mention of censorship in the British coverage of Cannes, not even in Kaleem Aftab's (2009) praise-filled interview with von Trier in which he nonetheless describes the film as "Lars von Trier's pornographic first stab at horror." This debate, however, began in earnest when the BBFC passed the film uncut at "18."

Rated "18"

The *Guardian* (Child 2009), the *Sun* ("The Sneak" 2009), the *Sunday Times* (Appleyard 2009) and the *Daily Mail* (Hart 2009) reported the decision. During this period, from June 12th to the film's release on July 24th, there was continued coverage consisting of interviews, extensions of the misogyny debate (e.g. Gritten 2009) and a further response from Wendy Ide (2009b) who reiterated her belief that the film is a cynical publicity stunt. Upon the film's release, reviews prompted further discussion of censorship issues in the *Daily Mail* (Tookey, 2009) and the *Guardian* (Bradshaw 2009b) and further comment from Mediawatch UK, the re-branded National Viewers' and Listeners' Association of Video Nasties fame, in the *Star on Sunday* (Lea 2009).

The first report, from Ben Child (2009) at the *Guardian*, features statements from the BBFC's David Cooke and Sue Clarke and praise from the anti-censorship group Melon Farmers for the BBFC's consistency and transparency. However, the piece begins and ends on a combative note. The sub-heading reads: "As Sweden disbands its censorship board, its British counterpart passes the entirety of Lars von Trier's Cannes shocker for viewing with an 18 certificate." Child reports that the film has been passed "despite scenes featuring erect penises, violent sex and genital mutilation," before allowing David Cooke an explanation and Sue Clarke a chance to explain the different attitudes of Sweden and the UK to censorship. John Beyer of Mediawatch UK closes the piece by calling the BBFC "far too lax" and voicing his support for a bill by Conservative MP Julian Brazier to make the Board accountable to parliament. The description of *Antichrist* as a "shocker" and of its contents only in terms of sexual and violent acts when paired with the story of Sweden disbanding its censorship board seems to endorse Beyer's assertion that the UK needs to reappraise the Board's position. Beyer also criticises the "12A" rating which he believes allows children to see "some very unsuitable material." The inclusion of this statement near the end, despite its irrelevance to a story about a film being passed for adults at "18," brings the piece full-circle to the *Guardian*'s implication in the subheading: the BBFC, like Sweden's censorship board, may as well not exist.



(http://filmint.nu/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/antichrist4.jpg)

Antichrist

John Beyer re-appears later, in Roya Nikkhah's (2009) piece in the *Telegraph*, to state that the BBFC should have denied *Antichrist* a certificate. Nikkhah describes the film, as Child does, as a series of graphic images and, echoing co-worker Anita Singh's (2009) statements from Cannes, describes the film as containing scenes of "torture and pornography," the latter referring to "graphic unsimulated sex." As with other negative accounts of the film's "pornographic" content, such as Singh's, the offending material is pluralised; "scenes" of pornography are described. In the film, there is one shot of explicit penetration. Another shot features an erect penis, but such a shot could not be mistaken for pornography being placed, as it is, in the context of an act of mutilation. Exaggerating the amount of objectionable content further sensationalises the article and permits harsher criticisms of the film and of the BBFC.



(http://filmint.nu/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/anticristo9_reference.jpg)

Antichrist

Directly after the BBFC are quoted in Nikkhah's (2009) article as saying two scenes "will be shocking and offensive to some viewers," Conservative MP Julian Brazier – he of the bill to make the Board accountable to parliament – is quoted as saying "this does seem to be one more example of how the BBFC has given up on trying to regulate material which the majority of the public feel is offensive." Important is the shift in language, from the BBFC's "some viewers" to Brazier's "majority of the public," amplifying the potential for offense. BBFC director David Cooke is allowed to give a brief explanation of the Board's decision at the end of the article, but by then an impression has already been formed of the Board as an irresponsible organisation that needs, as Brazier's bill proposed, to be accountable to a higher authority. John Beyer of Mediawatch UK makes a further appearance in the *Star on Sunday* (Lea 2009) and there goes further, calling for the BBFC to be replaced by a government body.

Julian Brazier's concerns about the BBFC's dereliction of duty – their failure to prevent widespread offense, as he sees it – are echoed in the *Sun* ("The Sneak" 2009), even if the man himself does not appear. It opens: "The British Board of Film Classification used to be referred to as censors. But it seems they have given up on that role." The *Sun*'s anonymous journalist, "The Sneak," calls for the BBFC to at least "find a better way to warn cinema-goers what they face." That "The Sneak" neglects to quote the BBFC's explanation of the decision and fails to mention the BBFC's websites, which provide detailed warnings, is typical of an article featuring inaccuracies concerning both *Antichrist* and *The Idiots* (von Trier's 1998 film). Plot inaccuracies, a telling sign of a publication's disdain for a film or genre, as noted by Peter Hutchings (1993) in his study of the reception of Hammer horror films, occur on a few more occasions. Interestingly, the *Star on Sunday*'s later article (Lea 2009) features a plot inaccuracy – the use of a "concrete block" – which is phrased almost word-for-word as "The Sneak" phrases it here, suggesting a cannibalistic relationship between such publications when a little outrage is required at a moment's notice.

Appleyard and Hart

Bryan Appleyard (2009) of the *Sunday Times* makes a larger error, mistaking the hundreds of women in the film's closing scene for hundreds of children, but as his review is framed around a cinema trip it is reasonable to assume he has seen the film. Unlike, that is, Christopher Hart (2009) of the *Mail* who "prides himself on being broad-minded" and proudly proclaims not to have seen the film before recycling Appleyard's mistake in his article headlined "What DOES it take for a film to get banned nowadays?"

Appleyard and Hart share the belief that *Antichrist*'s lack of cuts came down to it being mistakenly regarded as art. However, where Appleyard believes *Antichrist* is posing as art, fooling "the suckers in the art-house crowd" and taking Tarkovsky's name in vain in its closing dedication, Hart places no value in the idea of films as art whatsoever, associating the concept with "our arts mandarins, along with the rest of the lofty liberal elite" who take "our" money and do not ask us "our" opinion; "us," being Hart and his intended readers, are in this instance the rest of the public who do not, in the *Mail*'s terms, fit into the category of the "lofty liberal elite." Both Hart and Appleyard fill their articles with appeals to their older, "Middle England" readership such as employing unfavourable stereotypes of lazy "fat-cats" and students: Appleyard describes von Trier speaking in "undergraduatese"; Hart criticises BBFC President Sir Quentin Thomas, who "gets £28, 000 for 25 days' work a year," and turns the article into a tirade against the European Union due to the Danish Film Institute's involvement with *Antichrist*.

(http://filmint.nu/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/antichrist2.jpg)

Antichrist

Hart's article is called a "remarkable thinkpiece" by a sarcastic Peter Bradshaw (2009a) in the *Guardian* and is even criticised, although not by name, by Chris Tookey (2009) in Hart's own *Daily Mail* for his having not seen the film. Bradshaw's main complaint about Hart's piece is that such outcries play into the hands of "silly old von Trier." He shares Ide's (2009b) belief that the film is not "sincere" and that it is designed to provoke critics. Bradshaw describes the likes of Hart and Appleyard as "rising like salmon to von Trier's cheeky bait." Bradshaw sees the film as a game, a publicity stunt, and therefore unworthy of any real discussion. Bradshaw's theory of *Antichrist* being a "prank" designed to attract attention, like the use of negative publicity (Singh 2009) in the film's marketing campaign, is demonstrative of the productive aspect of Annette Kuhn's (1988: 96) censorship model: censorship creates censorable films which trade on this conflict. Bradshaw dismisses the film and is therefore reluctant to enter into a debate about censorship on its behalf: "Give it an '18' certificate, enforce the limit," he says, "and leave grown-ups to make up their own minds."

Appleyard has more to say than Hart on censorship and identifies what he believes is the real issue: "harm risk."

"It may be that mere films cannot harm people, or it may be that people should be free to harm themselves in any way they want. In either case, the BBFC is unnecessary and the law can deal with abuses such as child porn. Yet the existence of the BBFC is generally approved by the people, and therefore there is an institutionalised national conviction that harm can be done, and that people should be protected from it." (Appleyard 2009)

The work of the BBFC is defined as "unnecessary" or "pathetically ineffectual" (Tookey 2009). Both Appleyard and Hart operate under the assumption that the BBFC's entire purpose is to censor films passed at "18," ignoring cuts made on films with lower ratings which would not be covered by law. Dismissing this element of the Board's work, when paired with criticisms of passing anything and everything at "18," implies that the Board, and its well-paid President, do very little work.

Chris Tookey (2009) cites the Board's passing David Cronenberg's *Crash* (1996) uncut as the beginning of the end, but Appleyard goes further back, to 1971 and the release of *Straw Dogs* and, a year later, *A Clockwork Orange*, among others. Appleyard states that extreme violence became the norm in 1971, but that these films pale in comparison to *Antichrist.* Such re-landscaping of the past to present it as a simpler, more innocent time is a common feature of negative criticism identified by Barbara Klinger (1994). Appleyard then makes a leap that would not look out of place in one of Tookey's tirades against *Crash* which suggested that copycat crimes would not be far behind (Barker et al. 2001: 14); Appleyard (2009) states: "In 1972 a teenage killing was blamed on *A Clockwork Orange*." This statement reveals a "figure of the audience." Martin Barker (2004) identifies a "figure of the audience" as a discursive technique in which a theoretical spectator is constructed to illustrate the dangers of the film should it influence this specific type of spectator. (For *Crash*, this was a "young, deviant male" who was presented as in danger of being inspired by the film to drive recklessly.) The adult "dimwits" might applaud, he says, but the film sets a dangerous example for teenagers.

Appleyard (2009) outlines his concept of "harm" as it would apply to his hypothetical teenager, stating that one film will not make much difference but "a prolonged diet of such material almost certainly will." "Unless a crime is committed, or some clear mental illness appears, the damage [...] may not be apparent," he says, "other than in the form of decayed and empty personalities." Handily for his argument, he says, "the harm will be terrible but indefinable." The creation of this hypothetical teenager who subsists on a cultural diet of violence, who might be pushed over the edge by *Antichrist*, is an emotional appeal to his older readership. If no crime is reported, Appleyard has hedged his bets by stating that this hypothetical teenager (a powerful appeal to parents) might be damaged in the other, invisible way. Appleyard paints a picture of an inactive BBFC before birthing a theoretical audience member to demonstrate the knock-on effect of this inactivity.

Chris Tookey

The *Mail* published Chris Tookey's (2009) review on *Antichrist*'s UK release date. As Tookey was instrumental in the furore surrounding *Crash*, the *Guardian*'s Peter Bradshaw (2009a) anticipates his review in his article about the "misplaced outrage" over *Antichrist*. Tookey disapproves of *Antichrist*, but his manner is a far cry from Hart's (2009) righteous indignation. The review, billed as a personal attack – "The man who made this horrible, misogynistic film needs to see a shrink" – treats the passing of *Antichrist* as a consequence of the BBFC's decline into a "pathetically ineffectual organisation" in recent years.

(http://filmint.nu/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/movies_crash_still_

Crash

Tookey sees *Crash* as the turning point for the BBFC, but he lists more recent examples which demonstrate, for him, the Board's failings: *Hostel: Part II* (2007), *The Piano Teacher* (2001) and *Baise-moi* (2000). From this list, featuring scenes with castration and unsimulated sex, *Antichrist* seems almost a "greatest hits" package of every offensive act that the BBFC has permitted in recent years. Tookey describes *Antichrist* as a combination of three genres, "arthouse, horror and hard-core pornography," echoing Anita Singh's (2009) Cannes review. Tookey rejects her idea of *Antichrist* as "the most shocking film in the history of the Cannes Film Festival." In dismissing the idea of *Antichrist* as exceptional, Tookey can place *Antichrist* alongside the aforementioned list of films and present a BBFC in decline rather than a BBFC who have passed one exceptionally gruesome film for release.

Tookey quotes one of the Board's guidelines, to cut "portrayals of sexual or sexualized violence which might, for example, eroticise or endorse sexual assault," before he criticises them for passing *Antichrist*. This contradicts a claim he makes two paragraphs earlier: "These scenes are extremely graphic, but they are deliberately made unpleasant to watch, and profoundly unerotic." He says the male victim is the sympathetic character, "at least up to the point when he turns the tables." With the film's sympathies never lying with the aggressor in the scenes Tookey describes as "deliberately unpleasant [...] and profoundly unerotic," it seems that *Antichrist* could hardly be accused of eroticisation or "endorsing sexual assault."

(http://filmint.nu/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/baise-moi-2000-05-g.jpg)

Baise-moi

Despite contradicting himself, Tookey forges ahead to criticise the BBFC for previous perceived failings, stating that the Board is "funded by film companies and seemingly unaccountable to the public." He implies corruption, or at least a bias, within a secretive organisation which cannot be fought while at the same time presuming to speak for the public as a homogeneous collective who all demand a more accountable BBFC. The latter is a common technique employed by the press and previous examples of critics positioning their remarks as "public opinion" have been discussed by Julian Petley (2011). Whereas other critics have allowed the BBFC spokespeople to respond in a combative article (Child 2009; Nikkhah 2009), Tookey does not allow them a voice. He does, however, rephrase the BBFC's own statement as a criticism: "The BBFC has permitted comparable explicit images in a number of previous features at the '18' level" (BBFC 2009) becomes "there is nothing in *Antichrist* that this pathetically ineffectual organisation [...] has not let through before, with an '18' certificate."

The Human Centipede II (Full Sequence)

Coverage of *HC2* began after the BBFC's decision on June 6th, 2011, to refuse to classify the film for release. BBFC director David Cooke (BBFC 2011a) said releasing the film "would be inconsistent with the Board's Guidelines, would risk potential harm within the terms of the VRA [Video Recordings Act], and would be unacceptable to the public" and may be in breach of the Obscene Publications Act. A later decision (BBFC 2011b) to release the film with heavy cuts (2 minutes 37 seconds) prompted a new cycle of reports which also covered the film's UK release on November 4th, 2011.

The *Sun* ran two articles on the Board's rejection of *HC2*. The first (Anon. 2011b) is a short piece which employs, as other publications do, the description from *HC2*'s own marketing campaign: "the sickest movie of all time." The second piece, by Bill Leckie (2011), takes an anti-censorship stance which is the antithesis of the stance taken in the same paper by "The Sneak" (2009) upon the classification of *Antichrist*.

Where the BBFC were criticised for having "given up" their role as censors by "The Sneak," Leckie describes them as a "faceless committee" in a "supposed progressive country" where their actions restrict freedom of thought. "The Sneak" used *Bruno* (2009) with its harmless "slapstick" sex as a way to highlight the "ridiculous" decision to pass *Antichrist* with the same rating. Leckie uses mainstream cinema to illustrate a different point: "The Sneak" found *Bruno*

harmless, but Leckie describes the audience of such films as "idiots" enjoying "an endless torrent of Ben Stiller and Jim Carrey making fart jokes." For Leckie, it is Hollywood and celebrity culture which is the problem and he describes the BBFC working to force audiences to consume only unchallenging mainstream films. Leckie, despite his distaste for *HC2*, questions the decision and the concept of "harm."

Mark Mason (2011) of the *Telegraph* shares Leckie's disdain for *HC2* while criticising the BBFC's decision, but his real target is the film's audience. The question of "harm" is irrelevant, he says, as anyone who chooses to watch the film is already damaged. Mason views *HC2* as a symptom of depravity rather than a cause of it. In that case, Mason says censorship is unnecessary. For him, the BBFC are locking the stable door after the horse has bolted.

Mason also questions the BBFC's policy regarding violence – that violence is seemingly acceptable until it is sexualised – but Mason's colleague, David Gritten (2011), suggests the Board's decision may have been politically motivated. Gritten is surprised by their decision, placing it in the context of increasing leniency, and suggests that the BBFC were swayed by a shift of public perception condoning more government interference in issues of public morality. He believes that the debate of the day about the "sexualisation of society," including discussions about television watersheds and inappropriate children's clothing, may have influenced the Board.

(http://filmint.nu/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/HC2.jpg)

HC2

The Guardian

Peter Bradshaw (2011a) mentions that some believe that censorship is now "politically fashionable," but that is the extent of the political discussion regarding censorship at the *Guardian*. In three articles, by Bradshaw (2011a), David Cox (2011a) and Sarah Ditum (2011), *HC2* is used as a starting point to discuss the relevance, boundaries and dangers of censorship in modern Britain.

Cox shares Mason's confusion about the Board's focus on sexual violence and suggests that an "avalanche of non-sexual violence" on cinema screens could be just as harmful. He does not question the "harm," only its causes. Cox then attempts to use the plot of *HC2* as proof of "harm" with a ridiculous assumption which overlooks the fact that the film is a fiction with numerous possibilities in execution and intended authorial meaning: "[the director] himself clearly accepts that films can corrupt, since his new offering turns on that very idea." Cox accepts censorship as a necessity, but questions the Board's priorities. He wants tighter restrictions and, echoing Hart's attitude towards *Antichrist*, states that "we don't have to see the forbidden film to assess the censor's decision," a description is enough.

Sarah Ditum's article for the same paper, printed on the same day, begins with a similar approach; Ditum uses the "I'm anti-censorship, but…" opening popularised by disapproving critics, such as "broad-minded libertarian" Christopher Hart. Ditum describes *Antichrist*'s offending scenes and mentions *A Serbian Film*'s "newborn porn" concept, which involves the rape of an infant, in order to give the impression of a film culture on the slide into obscenity. Ditum, like Cox in a later article (2011b) and Tookey (2012), fails to mention that in the British release of *A Serbian Film* this act was cut by the BBFC. The concept is used as a "shock tactic," an emotional appeal which is discussed in misleading language to disguise the reality of the film (i.e. the act is off-screen).

Ditum reveals her intentions as she continues beyond her disgust at *HC2*'s plot to contextualise its violence within the horror genre. "Nothing done by Tom Six is as truly outrageous as the real cruelty seen in mondo films," Ditum says, citing unsimulated animal killings in *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980). She also quotes "horror connoisseur" Sarah Dobbs in her defence of "torture porn" as a genre with a "pretty solid moral core." This defence of the "torture porn" sub-genre, in which critics unanimously place *HC2*, ends with Ditum praising *Martyrs* (2008), another film often placed in the same sub-genre. She says of *Martyrs*: it is "almost unwatchably cruel, but it's got more to say about violence, suffering and voyeurism than any number of flesh-rending blockbusters." She constructs an opposition between horror films and mainstream Hollywood to highlight the strengths of the former. Ditum's concern is that if "bad" horror films (as she describes *HC2*) are not defended, then "good" films may be censored.

(http://filmint.nu/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/SerbFilm3.jpg)

A Serbian Film

(http://filmint.nu/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/HumCent2.3.jpg)

HC2

Pitting one film or genre against another is also useful in negative criticism; one applies inappropriate criteria from the favoured form to that being criticised to easier dismiss it. Often this takes the form of the "art" and "not art" opposition, as described by Richard Maltby (1998). Such an opposition is used later in the *Guardian*'s one-star review by Catherine Shoard (2011b). She discusses *HC2*'s monochrome look, setting *HC2* against acclaimed works from other traditions: "Is it a homage to Renoir? An ode to *Manhattan*-era Woody Allen?" This opposition presents the film in a particular negative light, as lacking features which are valued in the films of Jean Renoir and Woody Allen, and the film is subsequently judged against inappropriate criteria. Shoard's condemnation of *HC2*, and of the horror genre, revolves around this opposition and literally ends with "Hooray for Hollywood!"

Hollywood is not discussed in such positive terms by Peter Bradshaw (2011a). He suggests that the censorship debate is a distraction from the threat of cultural poverty at the hands of the oligopoly of corporations in Hollywood. Bradshaw quotes Jonathan Rosenbaum of the *Chicago Reader*: it is the "corporate behemoths and multiplex chains" which are the agents of "true suppression." Here, Bradshaw restates his position on censorship from his *Antichrist* article – certify it "18" and "let adults make up their own minds" – but the premise of his article is that the censorship debate, besides being a distraction from the real problem of Hollywood, is no longer taken seriously.

Bradshaw gives three reasons for the "un-seriousness" of the modern censorship debate: the circular nature of the argument has led to exhaustion; controversial films and books have been released in the past without disastrous consequences; and, finally, there is a lack of faith in the BBFC's ability to supress a film. Bradshaw, in a view echoed by Tom Six in a later interview (O'Neill 2011), is convinced of the Board's powerlessness. Both he and Six cite the Internet as a reason that the BBFC cannot restrict a film's availability in the UK. This idea of the Internet providing access to censored films is frequently deployed, as in Bryan Appleyard's *Antichrist* article, as a way to create the impression of a society which must try harder to maintain its cultural boundaries. This also plays into the concept of a "dangerous" spectator subsisting on a diet of extreme pornography from the Internet – always a young male – who might be pushed over the edge by a film, as in Tookey's (2011) article. Here, that pessimistic view of the Internet is used to undermine the actions of the BBFC.

The Daily Mail

The *Mail* (Anon. 2011a), proponents of copycat scenarios in their anti-*Crash* campaign (Barker et al. 2001: 14), does not evaluate the BBFC's decision and does not simply report the BBFC's action; the anonymous reporter instead introduces a question into the headline: "Will 'the sickest movie of all time' be released in the U.S.?" This question is not asked by other British critics.

The framing of the piece as a question posed to the MPAA hints at anti-Americanism, but the use of American critic Roger Ebert as an ally suggests it is more of a dramatic device to introduce conflict into what would otherwise, for the *Mail* (with its notorious censorious tendencies), be a "good news" story. References to nationality are a still a key component of this article. Repeated statements which treat the film-makers, and the franchise, as an "Other," highlighting non-British origins, attempt to stir anti-European sentiment. Six is the film's "Dutch director" (in the text and a photo caption), the original *Human Centipede* is a "stomach-churning German movie" and of the first film it is said, with a paragraph to itself, that "Although set in Germany, it was filmed in the Netherlands." Telling is the omission of the fact that *HC2* was shot in London. This anti-Europeanism is reminiscent of Christopher Hart's (2009) article on *Antichrist* which emphasised the involvement of the Danish Film Institute and the possible cost to British tax-payers.

"U-turn"

The BBFC's decision (BBFC 2011b) to issue an "18" certificate for a censored *HC2* generated surprisingly little coverage given the attention paid to the initial rejection. Only the *Express* (Anon. 2011c) and the *Guardian* (Shoard 2011a) covered the story in the UK. The film received more attention upon its release, but only Chris Tookey (2011) of the *Mail* and David Cox (2011b) and Catherine Shoard (2011b) of the *Guardian* discussed the film at length. Most of the coverage consisted of one- or two-line reviews in "Out This Week"-style articles (e.g. Frank 2011).

(http://filmint.nu/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/HumCent2.4.jpg)

HC2

In the *Guardian*, which heavily featured *HC2* during its initial trouble with the Board and published a piece on it after its release, it warranted just a one-paragraph review from Peter Bradshaw (2011b). A preview screening in Austin, Texas had earlier produced a review from Scott Weinberg (2011), but nothing of the same depth appeared to coincide with the film's UK release. The *Guardian*'s sister paper, the *Observer*, featured a one-paragraph review (French 2011) for the theatrical release and the same for the DVD release (Kermode 2011). Perhaps confirming Peter Bradshaw's opinion that the censorship debate had lost its lustre, Chris Tookey's (2011) inflammatory condemnation of the BBFC, unlike Christopher Hart's (2009) call for *Antichrist* to be banned, was not addressed by other publications.

Chris Tookey's Two Dutchmen

Tookey's article (2011), titled "It's not just the internet that's full of violent porn – so are cinemas," leads with a picture of Vincent Tabak, a Dutch man who had days before been convicted of murder in a highly publicised case. The anti-European undercurrent of the previous *Mail* piece (Anon. 2011a) is here renewed rather more viciously as Tookey links Tabak to Tom Six: "On the same day as Mr. Tabak was found guilty of Jo Yeates's murder, I was exposed to

the latest work by another Dutchman." Tookey uses Six's Dutch nationality as tenuous link to the trial in a clumsy emotional appeal to the paper's readership. His intent is clear: Tookey wants to borrow some of the ill-feeling towards Tabak to provoke anger in readers as they learn about *HC2*.

The same strategy evident in the earlier *Mail* (Anon. 2011a) article of marking the film as non-British, by focusing on Six's nationality, and through its perceived similarities to *A Serbian Film*, is also a feature of Tookey's review. After reiterating his belief that the classification of *Crash* was an error by the BBFC, Tookey describes how the aftermath of that decision, being more on-screen violence and sexual sadism, began in "foreign-language art-house films" such as *Irreversible* (2002) and *Baise-moi* before seeping into the English-language mainstream in the works of directors such as Eli Roth. Although *Crash* was a British-Canadian co-production based on a book by an Englishman, Tookey instead focuses on how European film-makers were enabled by the BBFC's decision to push the boundaries of taste.

It is the actions of the Europeans then, as Tookey tells it, that corrupted the mainstream. Tookey continues in this fashion when he turns his attention to internet pornography:

"The rise of the internet means any one country's attempt to maintain some minimal standards of decency can be of only limited effectiveness [...] Differences of culture means there will always be some country in which selling this kind of pornography will be not only permitted, but encouraged."

(http://filmint.nu/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/irreversible-2002-13-g.jpg)

Irreversible

Tookey's article, critical of the "lily-livered" BBFC, positions Britain as the "one country" which must defend its cultural borders against the pornography of "some country." He cites four films which led the charge with on-screen sex and violence post-*Crash*: *Irreversible* and *Baise-moi*, again, and *Seul contre tous* (1998) and *Anatomy of Hell* (2004). All four are of French origin, so Tookey adopts France as his "some country," with the Netherlands a close second thanks to Tabak and Six.

The use of Tabak's crime as a narrative framework for the article serves three purposes for Tookey: the first two, as discussed, are to borrow some of the ill-feeling of the murder case and to advance the paper's anti-Europe sentiments; the third function is to use Tabak's publicised addiction to violent pornography as "proof" of the influence of media on dangerous individuals. The BBFC's earlier decision to deny the film classification is also used as proof of the "harm risk" of the film. The decision to now pass the film is misleadingly described as a "reversal." Such language is present in other articles, as in the *Guardian*'s (Shoard 2011a) description of a "U-turn." This language presents the situation as a binary choice (reject/accept) and ignores the BBFC's imposed cuts. Tookey dismisses the cuts, stating that they "do little to reduce the horrors in the film." Tookey does not mention that the BBFC cut the death of an infant, an important issue Tookey had with *A Serbian Film*.

Guardian Reviews

(http://filmint.nu/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/Anatomy-of-Hell.jpg)

Anatomy of Hell

Tookey's article was not commented on elsewhere, which may have something to do with the critical consensus on *HC2* being especially negative. Neither Catherine Shoard (2011b) nor Scott Weinberg (2011) at the *Guardian* had anything positive to say about the film. Both reviews use pro-censorship rhetoric. Peter Bradshaw, who half-heartedly defended the *Antichrist* decision at the paper, had already dismissed the censorship debate (2011a).

Weinberg (2011) opens his article, which pre-dates the second BBFC decision, with the "I'm anti-censorship, but..." song before praising the BBFC for attempting to steer the public away from a film "that exists solely to disgust." In his efforts to paint the BBFC in a positive light, especially compared to the MPAA, Weinberg shares an anecdote about a "pleasant, intelligent, fun guy" he met once who turned out to work for the Board. Weinberg has no faith in the "ban," stating that it will inevitably be reversed, but he is full of admiration for the Board's taking a stand. The situation is again presented as a binary choice between "ban" and release which better allows the writer to create sympathy for an organisation which he depicts as *trying* to censor with the best intentions but ultimately failing as the unscathed film reaches the public anyway. There is no discussion of censorship in terms of imposed cuts. This binary approach, when combined with a lack of faith in the permanency of a "ban," makes censorship a non-issue.

(http://filmint.nu/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/HumCent2.1.jpg)

HC2

Nullifying the censorship debate allows Weinberg to criticise the film without appearing pro-censorship, playing to the *Guardian*'s more liberal readership. Weinberg's premise, stated in the headline, is that the BBFC "saved" the public from "a shockingly boring film." The BBFC's refusal to classify *HC2* is seen as temporary and Weinberg, because he overlooks the issue of possible cuts, presents that refusal as a stamp of disapproval rather than an instance of censorship. This idea of the BBFC acting as "arbiters of taste,"

rather than as censors, appears in Shoard's (2011b) *Guardian* review and Mark Kermode's (2011) review for the *Observer*. A sidebar in a *Daily Mail* article (Anon. 2011a) covering the June 6th decision describes the Board as such: "Since 1912, the film classifier has been the arbiter of good taste."

The unifying theme in the articles from Weinberg (2011), Shoard (2011b) and Kermode (2011) is of the BBFC trying to "improve" *HC2* through cuts. Kermode describes the cuts in terms of "the BBFC's best efforts." The sub-heading of Shoard's review states that the cuts cannot "redeem" the film before she expresses her disappointment at the BBFC's "U-turn."

Shoard's review is dismissive in tone, making light of the film's violence and undermining the lead character by calling him "wheezy" and "obese" and referring to him as the more casual Marty rather than Martin, as he is addressed in the film. Shoard states that the cuts imposed could not "redeem the fundamentals" of the film, and her main criticism of the film, in the same paragraph, is that it is not as scary as the original. For Shoard, Kermode and Weinberg, the censorship debate is not worth entering for a poor quality film. Whereas Sarah Ditum (2011) worries for the fate of "better" films, these three critics instead lament that the Board could not "improve" *HC2*.

Conclusion

In a profile of the BBFC, Andrew Pulver (2011) attempts to summarise the problem the Board faces with the British press: "libertarian types object to [the BBFC's] obstruction of the nastier end of the horror spectrum [...] while the censorious faction regularly accuse it of being soft on corrupting material." This appears to be generally true in both the case of *Antichrist* and *HC2*, but the divide between the "libertarians" and the "censorious" shifts and there are a number of factors which seem to influence whether a critic is supportive or critical of the BBFC's actions.

(http://filmint.nu/wp-content/uploads/2015/01/EUYkmu72yZrK8w(

HC2

Pro-censorship arguments concerning *Antichrist* are superficial at best. For Chris Tookey (2009), it is an afterthought. It appears at the end of his review, occupies but a few short paragraphs and his criticisms of the BBFC actually contradict his issues with the film. As with Hart's (2009) article and those in the *Sun* ("The Sneak" 2009) and the *Star on Sunday* (Lea 2009), pro-censorship rhetoric in articles by disapproving critics is used to sensationalise their stories. In the case of the *Star on Sunday*'s recycled article from the *Sun* and Hart's tirade against the European Union, it dramatizes a fill-in article and allows a chance to champion the publication's views on Europe. The *Sun* changes its position on censorship, from pro-censorship in protest against *Antichrist* ("The Sneak 2009) to anti-censorship in protest against the BBFC's rejection of *HC2* (Leckie 2011), suggesting a tendency to adopt the most combative approach to introduce conflict into such articles. Baz Bamigboye's outburst during the Cannes press conference also seems a cynical effort to create controversy rather than a real criticism of the film when considered alongside his statement made before the press conference, that *Antichrist* "provided some much needed buzz to the festival" (Bamigboye 2009a).

The BBFC is portrayed as an organisation in decline in negative coverage of *Antichrist* and is not mentioned in positive reviews. The *Mail* refuses to praise the BBFC even when their actions, such as the rejection of *HC2* or the tightening of the Board's guidelines, are in line with the publication's views: *HC2*'s rejection became a question about the MPAA's intent (Anon. 2011a) and a re-edited version of Tookey's (2012) *HC2* review was re-printed a year later, using Tookey's description of the BBFC as "lily-livered" as the headline, to coincide with the BBFC's policy change as a result of the Ipsos MORI (2012) research. The *Mail* is consistently critical of the Board. The lack of response to Tookey's original *HC2* outcry (2011) and its reprint (2012) from the *Guardian* and the *Observer* is supported by an increase in pro-censorship rhetoric in both, from Shoard (2011b), Cox (2011b) and Weinberg (2011) in the *Guardian* and Kermode (2011) in the *Observer*.

Annette Kuhn's model of censorship includes the press as one of many parties with the potential to exercise power. A full study of the process of censorship in this instance would require a look at other powers operating at the time, for instance the political climate as mentioned earlier. Nevertheless, the writings of critics and journalists can be seen as an important part of the process of censorship that, with an increase in pro-censorship rhetoric in 2011, contributed to the BBFC's later announcement to crack down on depictions of violence and sexual sadism. No two instances of censorship are alike, of course, and the press may not have the same level of influence in other examples, but I believe here there is a clear link within, as Annette Kuhn has described, a complex process, rather than a simple act, of censorship. As Kuhn states, "there is more to censorship than cuts, bans and boards of censors" (1988: 126).

Martin Smith graduated from Aberystwyth University in 2013.

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One thought on "Revulsion and Derision: *Antichrist*, *The Human Centipede II* and the British Press"

Greta Hopkins says:
January 29, 2015 at 12:23 am (https://filmint.nu/revulsion-and-derision-antichrist-the-human-centipede-ii-and-the-british-press/#comment-1699)

Was Antichrist taken too far? Not quite… Willem Dafoe and Charlotte Gainsburg were amazing, loved Charlotte in Nymphomaniac as well. Cinemagoers should know exactly what they'll see, a movie with this name isn't about rainbow and fairy princess, it's plain obvious this will have some very disturbing scenes. For a total budget estimated at around $11 million they did an awesome job, ranking almost $400 million – people sure like "forbidden" movies.

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