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# Morality and the Movies Week 1.

## Andrew Graves

### Early British Cinema

- The first examples of 'moving picture shows' were the Kinetoscopes – AKA 'flickers' or 'peepshows' or 'What the butler saw machines'

### The Penny Gaffs

- Working class patrons who would regularly cram into the pre-theatre set ups of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.
- Film shows or 'penny gaffs' were often exhibited in hurriedly converted shops or other such abandoned buildings.
- They were poorly equipped, cramped, and conditions were squalid to say the least.
- Rudimentary films would be projected either straight onto whitewashed walls or onto a stretched canvas. And the evening's entertainment would be played out in complete darkness, as no side lights would be installed.
- Often customers were so packed in and so transfixed by the images projected before them that there were many cases of people both male and female, 'relieving' themselves on the spot.
- Subsequently, early picture houses would reek of urine, sweat, smoke and if they were a more reputable place, disinfectant.
- The complete blackness would not only provide cover for certain forms of more intimate behaviour but it would also be the cause of minor accidents. This, coupled with the poor ventilation and often talked of fire risk, would eventually lead to the first victory for an outraged moral minority.

### 1909 Cinematograph Act

*"was designed to regulate public screenings of films and to ensure that cinemas were in a suitable physical state to screen films safely. The Act was created in the first place because highly unstable nitrate film stock had caused several serious fires."* - BFI

- Local authorities, spurred on by parsons, teachers and civic leaders, used the vague wording of the act to justify their own sense of ethical and or religious outrage.
- The act's use of the term 'Inflammable Film' was open to 'liberal' interpretation

'Will the power given to the Council enable it to control the nature of the entertainments to come?...It is the duty of the police to stop any entertainments of a doubtful character, but certainly the Council would have the power to when the license places came up for renewal in twelve months, to refuse to license places which had presented undesirable shows. The knowledge that it possessed that power would be another powerful factor in securing a high class of entertainment, to the general good of the trade.'

**Walter Reynolds, London County Council (1909)**

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### The Beginnings of censorship

- On July 12 1910, the LCC (London County Council), officially banned the showing of a heavyweight boxing match between Jack Johnson and James J Jeffries.
- In October 1911 Blackburn Council forced cinema owners to submit their programmes to the Chief Constable for inspection

### Some initial grievances

- The use of American slang in subtitles of intertitles
- The standard of film posters which was deemed worse than '...the most plebian of play in the vilest and most poverty-stricken purlieus frequented by the veriest riff raff of the amusement going public'

"According to a consensus of council critics the films themselves were full of 'obscenity', 'cruelty' and 'lunacy' and what's more 'caused blindness" - **Matthews, T.D (1994) *Censored***

### The British Board of Film Censors

'The British Board of Film Censors (BBFC) began operating on 1st January 1913. Established by the British film industry as an independent body, the aim was to reduce interference from licensing authorities and politicians. The BBFC centralises film content advice, but the real power remains with local authorities. Local government can pass a film banned by the BBFC, ban a classified film, or change a film's classification.'

[https://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2000/09/26/film\\_classification\\_article.shtml](https://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2000/09/26/film_classification_article.shtml)

- The BBFC initially relied on just two certificates to distinguish film content:
  - U - film especially suitable for children
  - A - film generally suitable for public exhibition
- Between 1913 and 1932 the BBFC published an annual list of prohibited images and themes.

### Prohibited Depictions

- Scenes suggestive of immorality.
- Indelicate sexual situations
- Prostitution and procurement
- References to controversial politics
- Relations of capital and labour

### Battleship Potemkin (1925)

#### Sergei Eisenstein

'The film was rejected when first submitted to the BBFC in September 1926, on the grounds that films should not address issues of 'political controversy' and that Potemkin's pro-Revolutionary message was therefore unacceptable for classification. The BBFC's Annual Report for 1926 mentions that the film was rejected for "inflammatory subtitles and Bolshevist Proaganda".'

<https://www.bbfc.co.uk/education/case-studies/battleship-potemkin>

'No doubt at the back of the BBFC's mind was the nine-day British general strike in May 1926 which had provoked fears amongst some quarters of society of a potential revolution in the UK. According to The Times, screenings of the film in Berlin had already led to unrest and a censorship battle between left wing supporters of the film and right-wing efforts to have it banned.'

'Following the BBFC's rejection of the film, Potemkin was submitted to the London County Council and Middlesex County Council for certificates for local screenings. However, the film was rejected by both councils, officially because of its violence.'

### **BBFC and the War**

'...if the Nazis wanted to create a civil war within England, they should make sure that every bomb they dropped fell east of Tower Bridge' - **Duff Cooper – The Ministry of Information**

'The minister was pointing in a roundabout way the dissatisfaction that was emanating at the time from the East End. (The King and Queen had recently been booed when they paid a condolence visit to the East End docks during the Blitz) Thus it was the present danger of the ruling classes being sustained in comfort at the expense of the industrial workers.' - **Matthews, T.D (1994) Censored**

### **The Ministry of Information**

'The imperative then, of the MOI was not to hinder realistic, relevant films but the exact opposite, to encourage their production. And the remarkable figure of only four films banned throughout the war implies that the MOI succeeded in the first stage of its mission to inform.' - **Matthews, T.D (1994)**

#### **Censored**

- The MOI had the authority the veto a council's decision to allow a film to be shown
- However, the MOI also had the power to reverse 'bans' if the films were seen as being useful to the war effort

### **Love on the Dole (1941)**

#### **John Baxter**

- Rejected twice before the war, was finally given a general UK release in 1941.
- In many ways, it paved the wave for the later Kitchen Sink productions
- Cobbled streets, grimy factory floors and dank and dingy parlour rooms
- Civil unrest
- Industrial fatality
- Pre-marital pregnancy
- A horde of disgruntled workers who go toe to fist with the fascist-like local constabulary.
- And as the title suggests, we also see the soul destroying, all too real effects of early 20<sup>th</sup> century unemployment, in a forgotten northern town.
- Although critically the film was well received, it failed to make much of a splash at the box office
- Whilst there was a growing desire on behalf of the working classes to see themselves reflected more fairly on the silver screen and in politics, what a film like *Love on the Dole*, hadn't provided was larger than life characters and unforgettable protagonists.



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