CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: IT WAS THE BEST OF TIMES, IT WAS THE WORST OF TIMES…

Home video recorders first came on the market in the late ‘70s and the so-called ‘video nasties’ arrived very soon afterwards. While the major studios dithered about whether or not to put their recent blockbusters out on tape, enterprising distributors filled the shelves of the newly opening rental shops with lurid shockers that would never had stood the remotest chance of getting a cinema release. In fact in the early days the only movies you could rent on video were low budget sex and horror titles. For fans of exploitation cinema, it was a Golden Age!   
 Allan Bryce

For anyone who is unfamiliar, the ‘video nasties’ moral panic must seem a curious and implausible moment in British history. In 1982, just as home video was finding a foothold, a panic erupted over the publicity materials that were being used to promote a disparate group of horror films that had just been released into the newly established marketplace. One tabloid journalist dubbed these films the ‘video nasties’, and the name stuck, quickly becoming a colloquial term that would be used to describe what were believed to be a new wave of extreme horror films entering the UK from the US and Europe. Concern soon began to build about the ‘video nasties’ and the effect that they might be having upon society, with some keen to suggest that the videos were the root cause of variety of social problems. This concern quickly escalated into a moral panic and a campaign that sought to ‘Ban the Sadist Videos’, with the tabloid press leading the charge that resulted in a series of prosecutions that targeted consumers, retailers and distributors alike. By 1984, the moral panic was over, passing almost as quickly as it had arrived, but in its wake, it left an indelible mark on British society, a slew of prosecutions, and the Video Recordings Act - a system of censorship that still governs films released to the British market today.

The ‘video nasties’ moral panic is an important moment in the history of British censorship and is most frequently discussed in those terms. However, as draconian as the legislation was, the moral panic played an equally important role in the formation of cult communities and the period is increasingly remembered as a golden age for exploitation movies. This is the perspective that informs Allan Bryce’s *Video Nasties! From Absurd to Zombie Flesh Eaters* (1998) and from which the passage above is taken. It captures perfectly the dominant narrative of the introduction of home video to the United Kingdom, and it conjures up the romanticised image of a lawless period in British history in which, for a short time at least, transgressive films were released unchallenged into the conservative British marketplace and to an audience that were hungry for uncensored tales of sex and violence. Bryce’s account shares many similarities with other accounts of the period and it is precisly because of these similarities that it is a useful place to begin deconstructing how a romanticism for the period has often worked to limit critical discussion and has obscured an industrial history.

The ‘video nasties’ are often presented as an external threat, arriving in Britain from somewhere else and having little in common with the established traditions of cinematic horror. This is a notion that was central to *The Daily Mail’s* press campaign and which constructed the independent British video industry as immoral opportunists, and this is an idea that can be seen, albeit implicitly, in Bryce’s suggestion that the ‘video nasties’ ‘arrived’, as if from somewhere else. The belief that the ‘video nasties’ were something new, foreign or different was one of the defining characteristics of the campaign against them and something that was repeated over and over again in accounts that sought to alienate and attack certain parts of the industry, and this idea that the ‘nasties’ were something new, foreign or different is reiterated in Bryce’s suggestion that these ‘lurid shockers […] would have never stood the remotest chance of getting a cinema release’ (1998: 3). However, while this was certainly the rhetoric of the press, as tempting as it is to imagine Britain’s conservative values under threat by this invasion of unknown controversial horror films, the idea that these films were completely new to the British marketplace simply does not hold up to scrutiny. Thirty-one of the seventy-two videos targeted by Department of Public Prosecutions (DPP) as ‘video nasties’ had already received a theatrical release in the United Kingdom in the years prior to being condemned on home video. Of the remaining forty-one films that became categorised as ‘video nasties’, only six were ever refused a theatrical certificate outright, while a further thirty-five were never submitted to the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) for consideration. While it is entirely likely that had they been submitted, some of this number would have been refused a certificate, that still does not alter the fact that almost half of the films on the DPP’s list had already received nationwide circulation prior to their release on home video. While this might seem inconsequential, but it is enough to muddy any real sense that these films should be understood as something new, foreign or different and presents a challenge to the invasion narrative that dominated the tabloid press. Bryce’s suggestion that ‘the major studios dithered about whether or not to put their recent blockbusters out on tape’, repeats another element that is common to most histories of the ‘video nasties’, which while having a basis in fact, does not attempt to map the marketplace in any meaningful way, interrogate the motivations and investment of the major studios, or scrutinize what their entry into the British video market might have meant for the independent sector, many of who were distributors of the ‘video nasties’, when they eventually did join the market. Instead, Bryce reiterates the popular narrative that this was a ‘golden age of exploitation’, with shelves filled to bursting point with challenging and transgressive films, until the Video Recordings Act cleansed the industry in a wave of censorious action.

To be clear, these challenges to Bryce’s narrative are not intended as a criticism of him personally. His work on the ‘video nasties’, both in the books *The Original Video Nasties: From Absurd to Zombie Flesh-Eaters* (1998), *Video Nasties 2: Strike up the Band: A Pictorial Guide to Movies that Bite!: A Pictorial Guide to the Movies That Bite!: v. 2* (2001), and in the magazines *The Darkside Magazine* and *Video: The Magazine* is incredibly valuable and he has been a hugely significant figure in the history of the ‘video nasties’. I have begun with Bryce’s account because it illustrates the romanticism that informs histories of the ‘video nasties’; and because, on a fundamental level, it is no different to other popular histories of the ‘video nasties’, all of which celebrate the ‘golden age of exploitation’ and capitalise on a sense of the distributors as illicit, dangerous or disreputable. Kim Newman speaks of ‘the plague years’, a term he similarly employs to invoke ‘a golden age’ (quoted in French 1996: 132), while Harvey Fenton, Francis Brewster and Marc Morris talk of ‘The Outlaw Years’, in an account that conjures up an image of pastoral Britain, before the ‘malevolent influence’ of the ‘video nasties spread across a previously innocent land’ (2005: 4). While none of these accounts are wholly inaccurate, each hyperbolically reworks the rhetoric of the tabloid press campaign to appeal to a readership who are invested in the golden age of exploitation and the idea that the ‘video nasties’ were the illicit product of a disreputable industry. In doing this, these accounts mirror the tabloid reports, in which distributors were not enterprising, they were unscrupulous; they were not entrepreneurial, they were opportunistic; and they were not independent, they were self-serving. And while this narrative served a clear purpose within the campaign, presenting the independent sector as sleazy opportunists, and as immoral, duplicitous and exploitative dealers, likening the effect of their products to the effect of drugs, the narrative’s continuation beyond the 1980s in fan and cinephile discourse is largely due the value that this image continues to have in the contemporary marketplace. The sum effect of this has reduced the dominant image of the early video industry to little more than a caricature. If we are to begin to think critically about the early video industry, then we need to begin by first recognising that much of our current understanding about that industry is derived from an image that was originally conceived, constructed and circulated by the media discourse of the tabloid press, and that this is an image that has been perpetuated by the communities invested in exploitation film.

While it is not my wish to absolve the video industry of any blame, there does need to be greater transparency about what they are being blamed for, and analyses and histories should begin by dispensing with inherited moral judgements about that industry that are largely derived from the tabloid press. This book seeks to complicate the common perception of what has been otherwise seen as a ‘thoroughly corrupt’ industry, by instead exploring a new economic sector that was struggling to self-regulate in the face of overwhelming adversity, but how the popular perception of the industry in public discourse, and in some cases their own marketing efforts, servd only to destabilise these attempts. It will chart the evolution of the ‘video nasties’ as they moved from media moral panic into profitable distributive commercial category, and will simultaneously examine the evolution of the independent home entertainment sector as it moved from an industry of generalists – producing products designed to appeal to as wide a demographic as possible, into specialists - capitalising on the notoriety of the moral panic and focussing on narrower range of products that were designed to appeal to niche or cult audiences. By examining the ‘video nasties’ over more than thirty years, it becomes possible to see how promotional strategies evolved, and how, as the industry has evolved, ideas of value and authenticity associated with these films has begun to change.

This book is comprised of nine chapters. Following this introduction, and as means of orienting further discussion, ‘Chapter 2: A Very Nasty Business’ provides a historical overview of the moral panic, presenting a potted history of the ‘video nasties’ campaign as it unfolded in the press, before then complicating the established narrative by presenting the image of an industry attempting to negotiate regulation in the face of overwhelming economic, political and social adversity. This emphasis on industry reveals that what is often thought of as being a quintessentially British phenomenon has many parallels with the implementation of broader legislative frameworks governing film globally in the American marketplace. This reconceptualization is explored in ‘Chapter 3: Tracking Home Video’which maps the emergence of the video cassette recorder (VCR) in the late 1970s and documents the economic boom that followed by examining the opportunities that were made available to independent sector through their early adoption of video technology and considers the significant independent players and the important, profitable genres. It then traces how the development of the moral panic facilitated the suppression of the independent sector, and how this coincided with the major labels finally committing to the market. ’Chapter 4: Historicising the New Threat’ scrutinises the invasion narrative that was central to the press campaign against the ‘video nasties’ and analyses how the British market for exploitation cinema relates to the American marketplace, exploring the differences evident in the kinds of promotion used across the different territories. The purpose of this chapter is to historicise the marketplace for exploitation cinema in the United Kingdom, but to also highlight possible differences between these markets that could account for the reaction that followed. ‘Chapter 5: Trailers, Taglines and Tactics’ offers a detailed analysis of what is widely credited as the catalyst for starting the moral panic, the promotional strategies of distributors. However, rather than blanketly accepting these materials as sensationalist and therefore problematic, this chapter locates this kind of promotion within contemporary practice and draws parallels between the marginal products of the independent industry and the mass-market appeal of the mainstream film industry. This leads to a consideration of other contemporaneous forms of publicity and promotion, as a means of challenging traditional readings of the ‘video nasties’ as having no precedent in the British marketplace. ‘Chapter 6: Branding and Authenticity’ looks at how the companies own branding practices evolved from the earliest days of the independents in 1979, through to the late 2000s and the consolidation of the sell-through markets that were formed in the early 1990s. This chapter traces the economic positioning of the distributors, assessing how an industry of generalists became an industry of specialists in a marketplace that was carved out largely by the moral panic, and examines how these branding practices began to move the ‘video nasties’ from journalistic rhetoric or media moral panic into a distributive commercial category; an epithet that could be sold by distributors and understood by consumers. ‘Chapter 7: Previously Banned’continues this perspective by considering the genrification process that the ‘video nasties’ have undergone since the term was first coined in 1982, examining how distributors, cultural intermediaries and fans have all added to the category, incorporating films based upon a collective notion of excess. Following this, ‘Chapter 8: The Art of Exploitation’ looks at ways that the decline of analogue technology and the advent of digital platforms like DVD, Blu-ray and, more recently, digital download, has triggered a process of reappraisal that even now is reshaping the contemporary market for the ‘video nasties’. It explores how this reappraisal is not based upon earlier conceptions of the ‘video nasties’ as archetypes of excessive exploitation cinema, but has been complicated by the idiosyncrasies and expectations of digital platforms like DVD and Blu-ray. This chapter will foreground how earlier ideas of authenticity are being negotiated and often neglected in favour of traditional concepts more commonly associated with the canonical film, and how these ideas are helping to elevate the ‘video nasties’ as important filmic texts and valuable artefacts in their own right. The book concludes with ‘Chapter 9: Conclusion: The Golden Age of Exploitation?’ which considers how the aesthetic of video is being mobilised in contemporary media as a mode of nostalgia that functions as a visual shorthand for the 1980s, drawing parallels between this generalised sense of nostalgia and the genre-specific nostalgia based around horror and the ‘video nasties’, it considers how the legal status of the ‘video nasties’ in the 1980s contributed to a sense of a golden age of exploitation that was imagined to exist outside of the commodification processes of the industry, before exploring how today’s marketplace might be better understood as a ‘true’ golden age of exploitation, with established markets ensuring that more films are available than ever before. Over its nine chapters, the book will detail the evolution of independent video industry in the UK and will explore how the market has changed for the ‘video nasties’. The book highlights the ways in which a desire to challenge the dominant narrative of the ‘video nasties’, as an explicitly moral issue and as an issue of censorship, while absolutely necessary, have limited critical discussion that has obscured the role that commerce and industry played in both the formation of the category and the continued evolution of the ‘video nasties’.