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# DON'T BE AFRAID

IT'S ONLY BUSINESS

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40 YEARS OF THE VIDEO RECORDINGS ACT



... it happened!

In 1983 The Daily Mail launched a campaign to “Ban the Sadist Videos,” amplifying a moral panic that has had a lasting effect.

## Don't Be Afraid.... It's Only Business

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### 40 Years of the Video Recordings Act

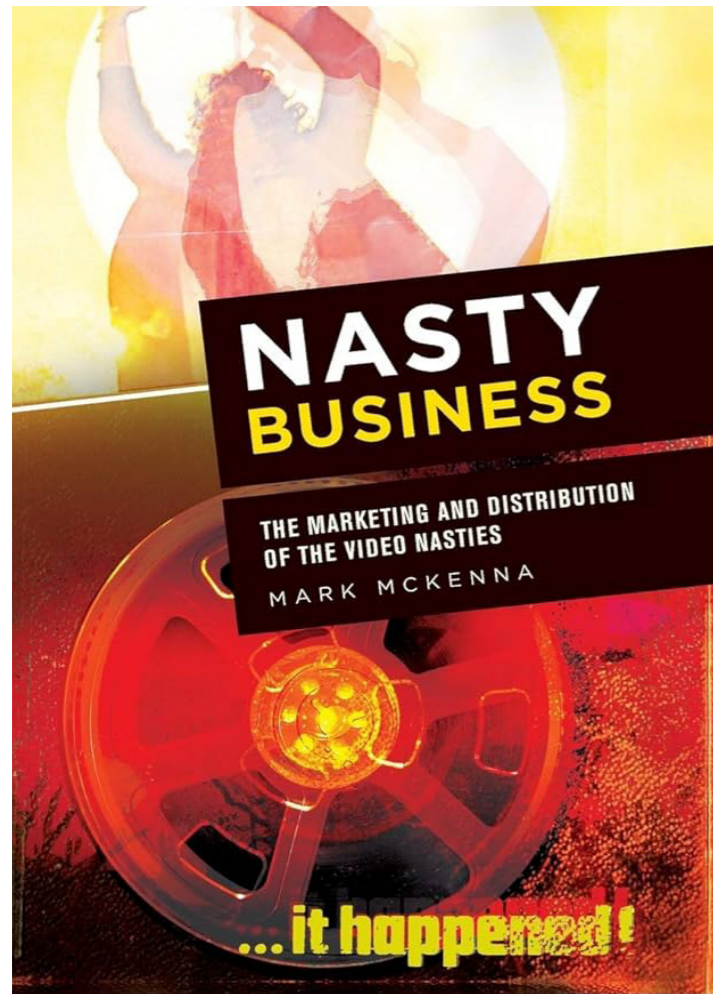
For anyone who is unfamiliar with the period, the moral panic that accompanied the arrival of video nasties must seem an odd and implausible moment in British history. In 1982, just as home video was finding a foothold, a panic erupted over the publicity materials that were being used to promote a disparate 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 was believed to be a new wave of extreme horror films entering the UK from the US and Europe. The video nasties were presented as an external threat, arriving in Britain from somewhere else and having little in common with the established traditions of cinematic horror and, while that narrative was easily contested, it helped perpetuate the perceived threat to British values that the video nasties posed.

The moral panic likened the effect of the video nasties to a drug with working class viewers deemed to be particularly susceptible to their effects.

This narrative continued with the effect of the Video Nasties likened to a drug and working class viewers deemed to be particularly susceptible to the harmful effects of what The Daily Mail were calling the sadist videos. Following a series of prosecutions under the Obscene Publications Act, the independent video sector fell, and the major studios moved into a market that they had hitherto neglected. This shift was, in part, facilitated by the Video Recordings Act and by the BBFC, who moved from a voluntary organisation with no statutory power, to body charged by government to determine what was suitable for viewing in the home.

# Dr Mark Mckenna

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He is the author of *Nasty Business: The Marketing and Distribution of the Video Nasties* (2020), from which this talk comes, and *Snuff* (2023), books that explore the industrial factors that contributed to the video nasties moral panic in 1984. He is also the author of *Big Wednesday: Lamenting Lost Youth in the New Hollywood* (2024), and is the co-editor (William Proctor) of the collection *Horror Franchise Cinema* (2022). He is currently completing work on his fourth monograph *Levelling Up the Screen Industries: Film Production and Regenerative Strategy in Place Left Behind* (2025), and work on another collection that explores another aspect of franchise culture, *Stars and Franchises: Identity, Image and Intellectual Property* (2025).

## Rethinking the Video Nasties Moral Panic in Thatcher's Britain

As prone as the British appear to be to moments of spontaneous moral panic, it is important to recognise the forces that instigate, underpin, and amplify these moments and to acknowledge that these forces are rarely benevolent, and the panics that result, rarely spontaneous. One example of this occurred in 1982. Just as home video was finding a foothold a 'moral panic' erupted about the nature of some of the video cassettes that were stocking the shelves of the newly established videorental shops that were appearing up and down the country. Criticism initially focussed on the advertising that was being used to promote a handful of the more salacious titles, but this narrative quickly escalated into what the conservative Christian campaigner Mary Whitehouse called a battle for 'the soul of the nation'.

The videos would become known as the 'video nasties' and the panic that surrounded them suggested that they presented a very real threat to society, particularly to children who were perceived to be most at risk from the harmful effects of horror films released on video. The video nasties quickly became a catch-all explanation for moral decline and were soon being blamed for all manner of social ills, from rape to murder and even the

horrific sexual assault of a horse with bottles and sticks. All were attributed to the harmful effect of the video nasties. Distributors and retailers soon found themselves targeted in a wave of prosecutions under the provisions of the Obscene Publications Act (1959) (OPA). The OPA made it an offence to publish obscene material intended for financial gain and the panic that surrounded the video nasties would ultimately become the catalyst that would lead to the introduction of the Video Recordings Act (1984) (VRA), and what is perhaps the most significant piece of legislation governing film that was ever introduced in the United Kingdom. The VRA gave the British Board of Film Classification statutory powers to classify, censor and ban films that it deemed to be problematic with impunity and, while the circumstances that gave rise to the introduction of the VRA are frequently described as a moral panic, imagined as a spontaneously occurring moment of public outrage through which, what was considered indecent, immoral, and obscene was redrawn, scholarly interventions in this area have long contested the narrative of spontaneous outrage. As early as 1984 as the full effect of the video nasties campaign was still unfolding, Martin Barker highlighted the benefits that the 'moral panic' posed to key players that were instrumental

to the success of the panic in the first place, most notably the Conservative Party who had faced a general election in 1983 after failing to deliver on the campaign promises of their previous election. While the political benefits to the Conservative Party are evident, the benefits to other key stakeholders have received far less attention, particularly those within the film industry who stood to benefit greatly from the narrative of moral conservatism.

This chapter will explore the motivations that underpin the emergence of the 'video nasties' moral panic, with a particular focus on the benefits to those operating within the film industry, most notably, the British Videogram Association - the trade body for the video industry; the British Board of Film Classification - a non-governmental organisation founded by the film industry in 1912 and responsible for the national classification and censorship of films exhibited at cinemas and latterly, on video; and the Motion Picture Association of America - the American trade association that represents the interests of the major film studios at home and abroad. Through an analysis of the overlapping and often competing interests of these organisations and a consideration of role the Department of Public Prosecutions, the National Viewers'

and Listeners' Association and the Advertising Standards Authority, this chapter seeks to reconceptualise the moral panic, not as a naturally occurring and spontaneous event, but as a mechanism through which the various agencies involved wrested control of the video industry from the independent sector.

### A Cultural History of the Video Nasties

To fully understand the opportunities that the moral panic presented to the key stake holders listed above, it is first necessary to understand the popular history of the video nasties, and

in *The Daily Mail* on May 12th, 1982, entitled 'The Secret Video Show'. In the article, Gareth Renowden, editor for *Which Video?* and video columnist for *The Daily Mail*, expressed his concern at the lack of a regulatory body or classificatory system governing video. He referenced a survey conducted by Scarborough school teacher Richard Neighbour, in which Neighbour observed that teenagers were accessing difficult and challenging films and that films such as *Scum* (Clarke, 1979), *Zombie Flesh Eaters* (aka *Zombi 2*, Fulci, 1979), *The Exorcist* (Friedkin, 1973), *Flesh Gordon* (Beneviste, Ziehm, 1974), and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Hooper, 1974) were among

was soon reiterated in an article in *The Sunday Times* that would prove to be much more influential and far reaching. 'How High Street Horror is Invading the Home' by Peter Chippendale speaks of "nasties," giving name to what would soon become collective fears in an article that is cited by Julian Petley as the first time the term appeared in the national press. Chippendale, significantly, singles out titles like *Snuff* (Finlay, 1976), *SS Experiment Camp* (Garrone, 1976) and *The Driller Killer* (Ferrara, 1979) as archetypes of the catalogue of depravity, but the article is also significant because it provides the template for what would become

in the mainstream British media, directing her attention at a myriad of diverse programming. From the seemingly innocuous, such as Tom Baker's 1975 incarnation as *Doctor Who* described by Whitehouse as 'teatime brutality for tots' to the ostensibly educational, such as *Panorama's* coverage of the liberation of the Belsen concentration camp, described by Whitehouse as 'filth' and 'bound to shock and offend'. Whitehouse and the NVLA had systematically targeted what they felt were problematic media since the organisation's incorporation in 1965. However, in 1982 Whitehouse took aim at the problem of video, and along with the press was quick to condemn what was increasingly being presented as a new threat – horror films released on video.

On June 9th and relying largely on the tabloid press for their intelligence, the Obscene Publications Squad, headed up by Superintendent Peter Kruger and acting in conjunction with the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP), conducted raids upon the premises of the three video distributors most closely associated with the video nasties: Astra Video Ltd., Go Video Ltd. and VIPCO Ltd. seizing *I Spit on Your Grave* (Zarchi, 1978), *SS Experiment Camp* and *The Driller Killer* respectively. Forfeitures numbered in excess of one thousand cassettes, and were pending the preparation of a report for the Director of Public Prosecutions to determine whether prosecutions could be brought against the three companies. These raids represent a significant turning point in how the police were approaching the problem of the video nasties – stemming the tide of videos at the source by removing the product entirely at the point of distribution. The Department of Public Prosecutions

compiled a list of what they felt were problematic films and began targeting the distributors of those films. Coverage of the panic oscillated between attacking the industry that produced the video nasties, and an emphasis on the supposed detrimental effect that these films were having on society. The latter likened the effect of the video nasties to the effect of drugs and suggested that children were particularly at risk from the threat that the video nasties posed. Headlines suggested that the video nasties were 'Sadism for Six Year Olds' and that the films were facilitating 'The Rape of Our Children's Minds'. However, following a test case at Willesden Magistrates Court which saw the successful prosecution of the company VIPCO, there is a noticeable shift in emphasis evident in the coverage of the moral panic. Headlines such as 'The men who grow rich on blood-lust' named and shamed distributors directly, while the article 'Fury Over the Video Nasties – The Merchants of Menace "Get Off"' documented Mary Whitehouse's feeling that the ruling at Willesden Magistrates Court did not go far enough. Distributors were increasingly depicted as comic book villains to such a degree that even a charitable donation made to the children's charity, National Children's Homes, by the managing director of Astra Video (the company responsible for releasing the nasties *I Spit on Your Grave* and *Blood Feast* (Gordon Lewis, 1963)) were reported as the 'Charity Shock from the King of the Nasties'. Reverend Michael Newman, Vice Principal of the National Children's Homes, claimed that they 'would not have accepted the money had they known of the company's involvement in so-called 'video nasties'.

Conservative MP for Luton South,

Graham Bright, was approached by Mary Whitehouse who suggested that he propose a Private Members Bill that would tackle the issue of the 'video nasties' directly. When Bright's bill was read to the House of Lords in June 1984, Lord Houghton of Sowerby highlighted that as early as December 1982 M.P. Gareth Wardell had attempted to progress a similar Bill through the house but was discouraged from doing so by the then Home Secretary Willie Whitelaw. Whitelaw reportedly said that 'there was a great deal more work which needed to be done on the matter before they could contemplate legislation' and remained steadfastly committed to the introduction of a voluntary scheme by which the industry could govern itself. A figure who remained committed to the introduction of a voluntary scheme, Houghton suggested that the only thing that had changed in the interim period was the Conservative Party's manifesto. With the General Election looming, the Conservative Party had decided to 'brush aside the attempts of the trade to get a voluntary scheme' and to instead introduce Government legislation. Martin Barker's account reiterates Houghton's suspicion, suggesting that following a series of political disasters including the Toxteth and Brixton riots in 1981, and the violence of the conflict in the Falklands that lead to the sinking of the ARA General Belgrano and the battle for Goose Green in 1982, the Conservative Government was clearly not fulfilling its campaign promises and was looking for something through which it could demonstrate resolve. It found this in the 'video nasties', swiftly acting on a largely fictitious problem that had been whipped-up by moralists and the right-leaning press. Despite Houghton's reservations, the Bill passed through the House of



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how that series of events led to a wave of prosecutions, forced many companies into bankruptcy, and ushered in government sanctioned censorship of video through introduction of the Video Recordings Act.

Popular media have long been viewed with suspicion and fears about the corrupting effects of the media can be traced all the way back to the introduction of the printing press. However, the idea that video should be viewed with suspicion and that horror videos specifically presented a new threat to society begins benignly enough, with an article that appeared

their favourites. Renowden argued that 'video gives the children access to something that the parents may not be able to control' (Renowden 1982), though, despite his misgivings, he was keen to clarify that this was not a call for censorship but simply a plea for stricter parental control in lieu of an industry sanctioned classificatory system. This article is significant for a number of reasons, not least for its rhetoric centred on child protection, something that would feature centrally in the campaign that was building.

Renowden's warning seemed to resonate throughout the press and

the defining characteristics of the so-called 'video nasties', described by Chippendale as films that revelled in 'murder, multiple rape, butchery, sado-masochism, mutilation of women, cannibalism and Nazi atrocities'.

The campaign against the video nasties would gain momentum when the press found an ally in Mary Whitehouse and the National Viewers' and Listeners' Association (NVLA) (the organisation that she founded and led). Whitehouse and the NVLA had campaigned for years against what they felt was the steady creep of social liberalism

Lords unchallenged, ably assisted by *Video Violence and Children, Part 1* (1983), a report that was compiled by sociologist and theologian Reverend Dr. Clifford Hill and the Parliamentary Group Video Enquiry. Hill's report is significant in that he claimed that four in ten children had seen a 'video nasty, a statistic that would later be debunked as methodologically flawed and fraudulent. Nevertheless, it was enough to give an imprimatur of credibility to the cause and helped propel Bright's bill through Parliament.

The prosecution of distributors would continue to gather momentum, and before the panic was over would see distributors serve custodial sentences for releasing horror films on video. This is seen to culminate on 3rd February 1984, when the managing director of World of Video 2000, David Hamilton Grant, was sentenced to 18 months in prison for being in possession of over 200 copies of an obscene article for publication for gain. Grant had released *Nightmares in a Damaged Brain* (Scavolini, 1981), a film which had previously been granted a theatrical certificate from the BBFC. However, Grant's version was marginally longer than the BBFC certificated release and was prosecuted on that basis. Grant served 12 months of the 18-month sentence and his company World of Video 2000 (and its parent company April Electronics) was put into liquidation. While much was made in the press about the threat that the video nasties posed, beyond the rhetoric of the press there is very little to suggest that parents were concerned about the threat of video nasties. In *Video Playtime: The Gendering of a Leisure Activity*, Ann Gray reflects on interviews she conducted with a cross-section of women from all social backgrounds, and suggests that while

some of the women expressed concern about the possibility of their children accessing unsuitable videotapes, surprisingly few mentioned the video nasties by name, this despite the interviews being conducted at the height of the moral panic in 1984.

The Bill was given Royal assent on 12th July 1984 and was slowly phased in from September of that year, coming into full force by 1st September 1988. This three-year grace period was given to allow the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC), the organisation that had been charged with categorising films that were released in video, enough time to censor and classify the huge volume of films that had been released up until that point.

#### **Towards an Industrial History of the Video Nasties**

While for many the story of the video nasties begins with the newspaper articles cited above, there was some concern expressed from within the film industry about the problem that video posed long before it made headlines in the tabloid press, though admittedly, this was for a range of very different reasons. Throughout this period, key stakeholders, such as The British Board of Film Classification, The British Videogram Association (BVA) and even the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) were all engaged in a discussion about the future of the video industry and, in many ways the video nasties moral panic provided them with an opportunity to reshape that industry.

To understand how the mainstream industry benefited from the video nasties moral panic it is first necessary to understand the origins of home video technology. Given the huge revenue

streams generated for the film industry first by video, and then by DVD and Blu-ray, you would be forgiven for thinking that the film industry was somehow involved in the development of video. However, the reverse is actually true, and for almost a decade the film industry instead played an active role in trying to suppress the technology. Sony launched the Betamax video format in 1975 and was met with immediate resistance from the film industry. Much of the concern stemmed from the machine's ability to record programmes directly from television, an addition that Sony had made after the prohibitive costs of pre-recorded cassettes resulted in Sony's failure to successfully market the Betamax's predecessor (U-Matic) as a home entertainment system.

The Walt Disney Company and Universal Studios were fearful that the technology had the potential to enable copyright infringement and responded with a legal action that challenged the 'legality of the manufacture, sale and home-use of VTRs (VCRs) to record copyrighted motion pictures from television broadcasts without compensation to the copyright owners'. *Sony Corp. of America v. Universal City Studios, Inc.* or the 'Betamax case' as it became known, continued up until 1984, with the Disney Corporation and Universal Pictures pushing for a decision that would nullify the recording capabilities of the technology. While Sony was embroiled in the court case, JVC had developed its Video Home System (VHS) to the point that it was ready to bring it to market, however, unlike Sony, they adopted an Original Equipment Manufacturer (OEM) model of dissemination, sub-licencing its technology to parent company Matsushita Electric Industrial Co. (Panason-

ic), who in turn approached RCA to distribute the machine in the United States (Wasser, 2002:73). In the United Kingdom, this meant that the VHS gained a lot of ground over its competitor in Radio Rentals and DER, who were both subsidiaries of Thorn EMI, a partner of JVC that had developed the format.

Despite a continued investment in the lawsuit, video was impossible to ignore, and Disney made tentative steps into the industry, establishing its own video distribution operation in 1980, Walt Disney Telecommunications and Non-Theatrical Company (WDTNT), while Universal estab-

lished its own MCA Videocassette, Inc. However, it should be noted that these early releases were typically older titles and that the major studios were still suspicious of the video industry. The court proceedings continued until 1984, and infringement of copyright remained a concern throughout this period, shifting the focus from that of broadcast television to 'tape-to-tape' piracy, which was becoming a growing problem faced by all corners of the industry.

on the Judiciary, Subcommittee on Courts, Civil Liberties, and the Administration of Justice. Valenti was arguing in favour of a bill that would allow the established film industry to either suppress home video, or profit from introduction of the technology by charging tech firms and videotape manufacturers a premium. Valenti argued:

The VCR is stripping . . . those markets clean of our profit potential, you are going to have devastation in this marketplace. . . . We are going to bleed and bleed and haemorrhage, unless this Congress at least protects one industry that is able to retrieve a

attracting investment and managing its public image at home and abroad. As President of the MPAA, Valenti is speaking with the full authority of the film industry, and his voice reflects the fear and concern that industry was feeling at that moment. However, despite Valenti's best efforts, in 1984 the Supreme Court of the United States found in favour of Sony and ruled that making individual copies of television shows for purposes of time shifting was fair use and did not constitute copyright infringement. Even as early as 1982 it was becoming clear that they were not going to be able to suppress the technology so they began discussions with the industry and its



## I say to you that the VCR is to the American Film Producer and the American public as the Boston Strangler is to the woman home alone

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In 1982, Jack Valenti, the long-time President of the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) addressed the House of Representatives, Committee

representatives to begin reshaping the marketplace – namely, the BBFC and BVA. The initial reticence of the major studios to adopt video had left a space that the industry was feeling at that moment. However, despite Valenti's best efforts, in 1984 the Supreme Court of the United States found in favour of Sony and ruled that making individual copies of television shows for purposes of time shifting was fair use and did not constitute copyright infringement. Even as early as 1982 it was becoming clear that they were not going to be able to suppress the technology so they began discussions with the in-

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The initial reticence of the major studios to adopt video had left a space for the independent sector to thrive. Though unable to access the mainstream cinema controlled by the majors, the independents had imported cinema from around the world and packaged them in what would later be described as lurid designs. In doing so had unwittingly attracted the attention of the British press and given rise to the video nasties as a category. From May 1982 when the first articles began appearing in the press, to

was forced to intervene, suggesting that ‘it is a competitive situation, and everybody was trying to outdo each other and be more outrageous. But now the publishers have decided to put their own house in order’. He announced the formation of a working party, in conjunction with the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC) with the aim of tackling the issue of video nasties.

Taken at face value, it is easy to imagine this as an organically developing situation in which the BVA are trying to manage the reputation of the entire video industry, however, the records of the Advertising Standards Authority are revealing. The ASA’s records are

Censors, to establish standards and a classification for video tapes. The Association is rightly anxious about the standard of much of the packaging and many of the advertisements. The BVA sent us several complaints against advertisements for videos so revolting (as, for example, those entitled ‘SS Extermination Camp’ and ‘Driller Killer’) that we were appalled by their publication and took stern action to prevent a repetition. The Authority is pleased that the video trade is making efforts to ensure compliance with BCAP and will continue to use the full range of sanctions at its disposal to repress breaches of the Code. In addition, the Authority has welcomed

concerned that ‘everybody was trying to outdo each other and be more outrageous’ but also suggesting that distributors ‘have decided to put their own house in order’. To assist in this, the BVA announces the formation of a working party with the British Board of Film Censorship to develop a classificatory system to help govern video and, in this narrative, the BVA present themselves as intermediaries and mediators endeavouring to advise their members on best practice and the best way to respond to these issues. However, in the report cited above, the complaints do not originate from the consumer but from the BVA themselves. These complaints are not the result of a public outcry, but of the BVA, the trade body responsible for the video industry, telling tales on sections of its own industry.

This is hugely significant, not only because it clearly demonstrates the division that existed in the industry at that time, but also because this predates any sense of concern that was later articulated in the national press and seems to be the original source of concern. In subsequent interviews Abbott could often be heard making distinctions between the independents and what he described as the respectable face of the industry so it should perhaps come as no surprise that the BVA did not represent the needs of the entire industry and that their membership was not inclusive.

In September 1986, only one year after the implementation of the Video Recordings Act, the British Videogram Association’s membership consisted of precisely thirty full members (BVA 1986). Included in this were all of the established Hollywood studios, recognisable from what would have historically been understood as the

‘Big Five’ and the ‘Little Three’: the studios that shaped the industry in the formative years of cinema. Warner Bros.; MGM (having recently merged with United Artists to release their works through the imprint MGM/UA); Paramount and Universal Studios (distributing through the imprint Cinema International Corporation (CIC)); 20th Century Fox (who merged with the CBS Corporation to form CBS/Fox); Columbia (who licenced their catalogue to Granada Video through the imprint The Cinema Club). Walt Disney joined the market in November 1982 with the release of Pete’s Dragon (Chaffey, 1977), a film that was at that point already five years old.

Outside of the established studios, many companies that had begun life as music producers such as A&M Records, Chrysalis, Polygram, Virgin or Picture Music International (PMI) – a division of EMI – were all making inroads into the video market. What this demonstrates is that the overwhelming majority of the film companies that held full membership with the British Videogram Association in 1986, were either established distributors associated with major studios, mini-major studios, the imprints for regional and national television stations moving into the video arena, or the result of multinational record producers extending into the video market. Clearly, by this time, the independent distributors that had established the marketplace and developed the networks and infrastructure had gone. This membership suggests a kind of oligopoly, though this is not without historical precedent, especially if we consider the British video industry an extension of the Hollywood film industry. Here, The Motion Picture Production Code

offers the most striking parallel, which as Richard Maltby has argued should be seen ‘not as the industry’s reaction to more or less spontaneous outburst of moral protest backed by economic sanction, but as the culmination of a lengthy process of negotiation within the industry and between its representatives and those speaking with the voices of cultural authority’. While not always visible, the MPAA, worked closely with the BVA and the BBFC to shape the future of the video industry. Together they devised a voluntary code that would be administered by the newly appointed Video Standards Council (presumably a precursor for the organisation of the same name that would not officially come into being until 1989). Although voluntary in name, the mechanisms of the scheme were such that if implemented, distributors, wholesalers and retailers would have had little choice other than to join. The process was simple: a distributor would submit their video to the Video Standards Council for certification and the council would then determine whether it was suitable for release. If the film was later deemed to be suitable for release, it would be classified using U, PG, 15 or 18 certificates and would then be made available to wholesalers and retailers. However, if a film were deemed to be unsuitable for release and then a retailer was found to be stocking that cassette, all distributors with an affiliation to the British Videogram Association – read the major studios – would stop supplying that retailer with their product, effectively preventing them from accessing mainstream Hollywood fare and squeezing them out of the industry. This is the proposal that was developed by the BBFC and the BVA, clearly working in partnership with the MPAA. Not only does this proposal assume that major

## “ Headlines such as ‘The men who grow rich on bloodlust’ named and shamed distributors.

August of the same year, there was a visible increase in the number of articles addressing the problem that the video nasties posed. However, predating all of this and in February of 1982, Television and Video Retailer magazine reported on a number of complaints made to the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) about the nature of the advertising being used to promote the videocassettes of *The Driller Killer*, *SS Experiment Camp* and *Cannibal Holocaust* (Deodato, 1980). These issues over the artwork predate anxieties over content by a matter of months, but when the problem eventually spilled over into the popular press, Norman Abbott, Director General of the British Videogram Association (BVA)

extensive, containing hundreds of thousands of entries going back to its incorporation in 1962. These records are catalogued against a variety of criteria such as advertiser name, complaint type, media type, issue/code rule, complexity. However, despite numerous attempts, they were unable to locate a record of any complaint against any of the advertising used to promote any of the seventy-two films associated with the video nasties moral panic. The only mention of the video nasties comes from the 1982-83 Annual Report:

The Authority has noted the action being taken by the British Video Videogram Association, in conjunction with the British Board of Film

the statement by the CAP Committee that it will expect the standards of BCAP to be observed by all advertisements carried on video tapes.

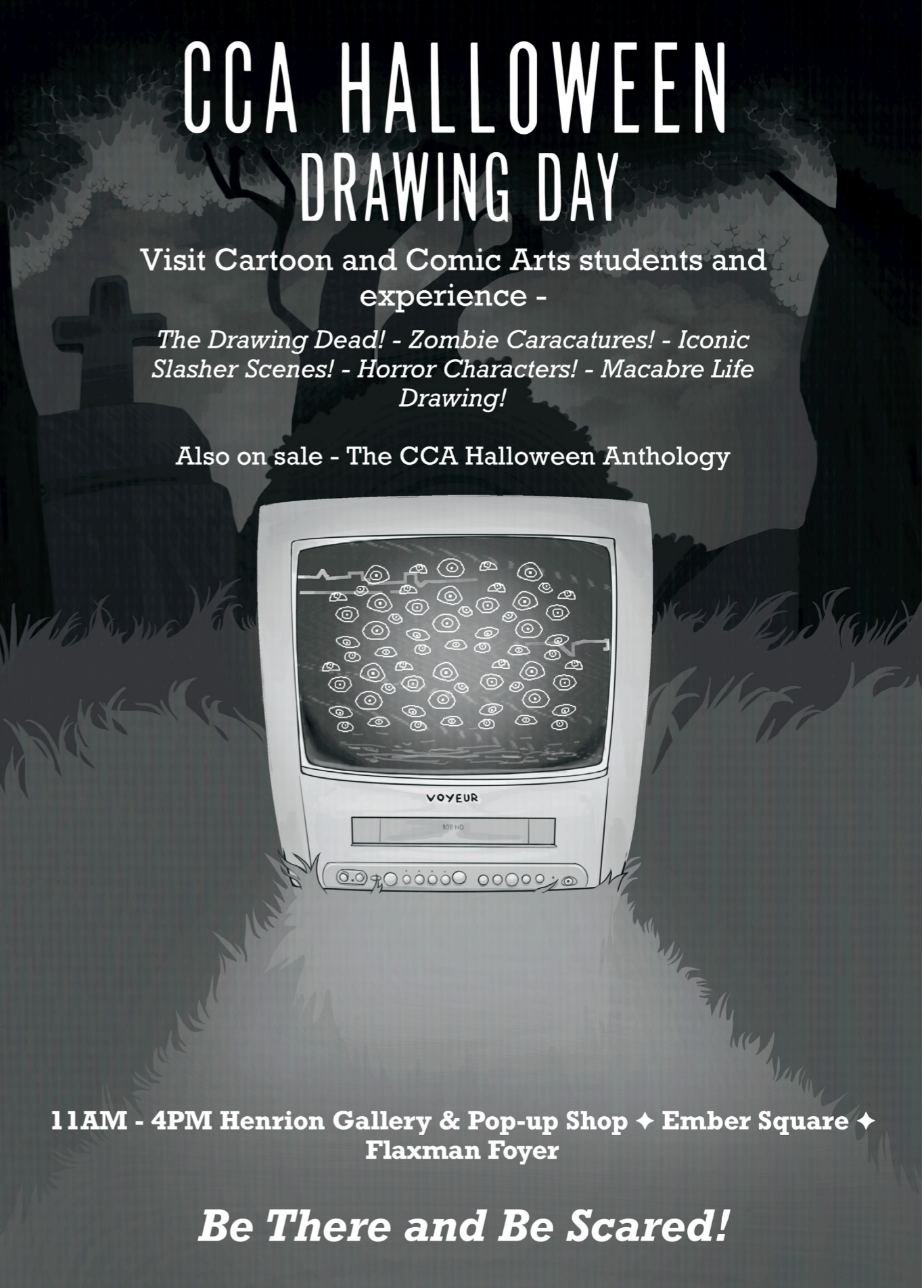
What this seemingly innocuous report reveals is potentially of great significance when it comes to establishing the origin of the initial complaints and has far-reaching implications that problematize the entire received history of the video nasties. Most accounts of the ‘video nasties’ begin in the same way, with a series of complaints made to the Advertising Standards Authority about the advertising being used to promote certain horror video cassettes. The British Video Association then responds to these complaints publicly,

distributors would not be on the wrong side of this legislation, but it also constructs a binary between them as the moral arbiters and representatives of the 'official' film industry and the independents as other. While the majority of industry were not consulted, the major studios played an active part of developing a solution to the perceived problem that video posed. Significantly, in the history section of their website the BBFC suggest that as an organisation, 'we take care that the film industry doesn't influence our decisions, and that pressure groups and the media don't determine our standards'. Clearly this early collaboration suggests that this hasn't always been the case.

### Conclusion

While the voluntary scheme proposed by the BVA, the BBFC and MPAA did not come to fruition, the Video Recordings Act is in many ways its spiritual successor, naming the BBFC as the organisation charged with certifying any commercial film released on video from the point on. The BVA's involvement in complaints against its own industry suggests an alignment with what Norman Abbott termed the 'respectable industry', couching his own industrial practice in starkly moral terms. However, more than that, his complaints reported in *Television* and *Video Retailer* magazine are the starting point for moral panic. Similar interventions in the press from James Ferman, the

Director of the BBFC, cast Abbott and Ferman as the moral stalwarts, protecting both an industry and a country from the enemy at the gates. In many ways, that enemy was globalisation and for a brief moment video democratised distribution. In doing so it provided a platform for global film, much of which had not been made available to the conservative British marketplace. This moment can be, and often is, romanticised by fans of cult film, when there is arguably a greater breadth of material available today than there ever was. Nevertheless, the moral panic needs to be understood as more than a moment of spontaneous concern and recognised for the benefits that it posed to the established film industry.



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Flaxman Foyer**

***Be There and Be Scared!***

# Dr Kate Egan

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She is the author of *Trash or Treasure? Censorship and the Changing Meanings of the Video Nasties* (2007), *Cultographies: The Evil Dead* (2011), and (with Martin Barker, Tom Philips and Sarah Ralph) *Alien Audiences* (2016), as well as co-editor of *Cult Film Stardom* (2013), *And Now for Something Completely Different* (2020) and *Researching Historical Screen Audiences* (2022).

She is also co-editor (with Shellie McMurdo and Laura Mee) of the Hidden Horror Histories book series (LUP), co-investigator (alongside Cat Lester) of the AHRC Youth and Horror Network, and is currently working on *Remembering Ghoswatch: Horror, Childhood, Technology and the Home* (with James Rendell) and *Researching Horror Fans and Audiences in the Twenty-First Century*.

## The Evil Dead's Status as a Cult Film

*The Evil Dead* was a film made by a group of relatively amateur young filmmakers for three main reasons: to turn their interest in filmmaking into a potential career; to make enough money from box-office returns to pay back those who had invested in the film; and, for Raimi, to allow himself the space to experiment with a range of filmmaking techniques in order to improve and enhance his abilities as a filmmaker. As I hope to have illustrated, the film's limited resources, chaotic production and its status as an initial experiment in feature filmmaking all contributed to its cult status and reputation. If, as Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik have argued, many cult movies 'seem to happen, more than to be planned' (2008: 7), then *The Evil Dead* can be seen to exemplify this. While the talent and hard work of the filmmakers clearly fed into the film's initial reception and success, its take-up was informed by a series of shifts and changes that couldn't have been envisaged when the film was made. These include the emergence of video and,

subsequently, the Internet and DVD, the growth in specialist journalistic interest in the horror film, and the emergence of a range of horror and fantasy festivals and conventions within Europe and the US. While Raimi, Tapert and Campbell clearly had a

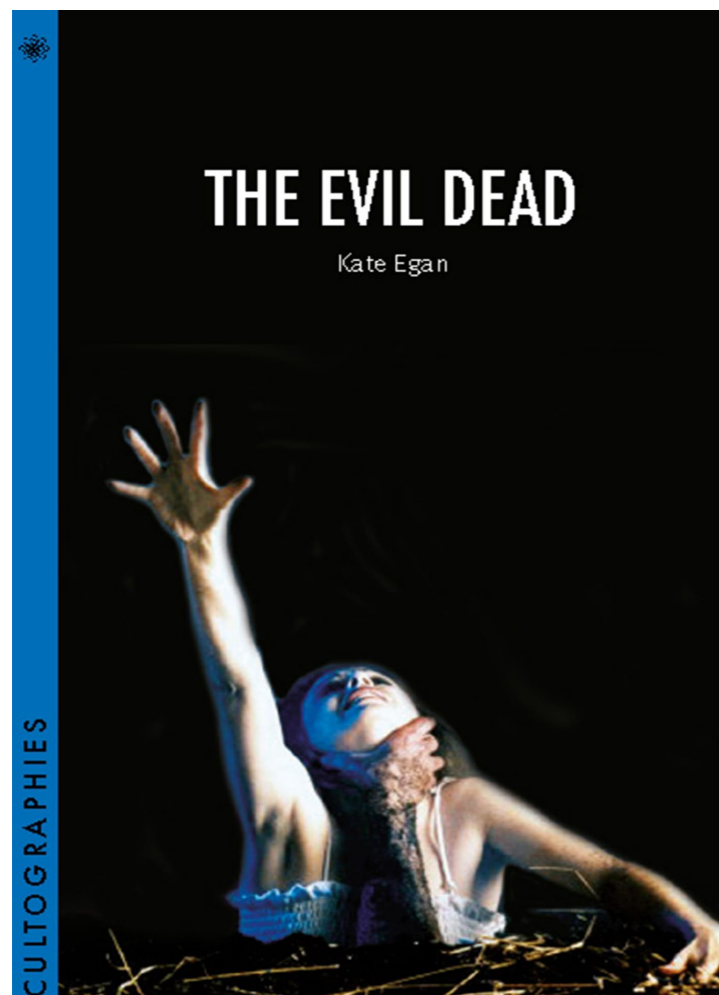
targeted audience and exhibition context in mind when they conceived and then made the film (namely the American drive-in audience), these changes in film culture worked to shift *The Evil Dead's* status from drive-in fodder to the, ultimately, more lucrative domain of the cult horror film. Consequently, this solidification of *The Evil Dead's* status as cult ably illustrates J. P. Telotte's claim that many films 'seem to become cult works largely because their audience – their potential lovers – cannot be accurately assessed through conventional wisdom, much less segmented and targeted' (1991: 8).

The Renaissance partners' strategy of fusing together elements from a range of horror sub-genres can also be seen to have contributed to *The Evil Dead's* subsequent cult status.

On the one hand, the film's use of scenarios and formal strategies employed in other successful horror films (as

well as its more explicit references to Tobe Hooper, Wes Craven and Jean Cocteau) allowed it to be read and appreciated intertextually, thus enabling fans and reviewers to draw on 'cinophile knowledge' and engage in a 'game' of 'horror genre reference-spotting' (Hills 2007: 446). On the other hand, the inconsistent or jarring quality

caused by this fusing could be seen, as argued in the last chapter, to give the film an ideologically 'dubious or ambiguous' quality (Mathijs & Mendik 2008: 9), particularly in terms of its representations of women. As Mathijs and Mendik have argued, this ambiguity, particularly if it relates to culturally sensitive issues associated with gender, violence and sex, can inform a particular film's cult reputation, giving 'the impression' that the film 'problematise[s] as well as reinforce[s] prejudices' and serving, simultaneously, as a 'core reason' for that film's cult appeal (ibid.). The fact that *The Evil Dead* was, in many ways, a flawed experiment is illustrated by Raimi's subsequent regret at the inclusion of the controversial tree rape scene. This scene seems to have been the product of both naivety and, arguably, the fact that the filmmakers were more concerned with creating a rollercoaster film experience than considering the potential thematic meanings that would be generated by their fusing of different sub-generic conventions. However, the jarring tones created by this technique gave *The Evil Dead* the kind of 'transgressive edge' (Fowler 2003) that has been seen to be a key appeal of many cult movies. Gaylyn Studlar has argued that 'the midnight movie's sexual politics ... are full of the contradictions of patriarchal ideology' (1991: 142).





Whether intentionally or otherwise, *The Evil Dead's* contradictory and ambiguous ideological perspectives enhance the film's potential to horrify and disturb, illustrating the way in which its contradictory treatment of gender and sexuality feeds into its status as a cult film on the one hand, and a particularly effective horror film on the other.

What I have done here, so far, is to almost 'tick off' those aspects of *The Evil Dead* (both textual and extra-textual) which seem to make it a cult film, in relation to the dominant characteristics that a range of theorists have associated with 'cult' (most particularly,

movements in the history of the horror film. When *The Evil Dead* is focused upon in reasonable detail, it is either in relation to a discussion of the 'video nasties' phenomenon, in relation to its status as a key independent American film, or in the context of a discussion of *The Evil Dead* trilogy as a whole. Consequently, *The Evil Dead* has been categorised, in academic circles, in a number of different ways. Firstly, and as illustrated in the last chapter, Julian Petley and Peter Hutchings have argued that the entire trilogy can be placed within the category of those films that are influenced by H. P. Lovecraft or that are particularly concerned with a kind of horror that

capsulates the tendency, in many modern horror films, to draw attention to and play with the film's status as a text, to affront moral sensibilities and to draw on perverse comedy). However, while *The Evil Dead* does exhibit some of the characteristics which he associates with 'horrority' – a perverse sense of humour, the affronting of morals, a focus on excessive gore and a play 'with the contradiction' that the film 'is only a movie' (1986: 11) – other identified characteristics (a lack of interest in the psychology of characters and a focus on loss of control of the body) seem to apply much more clearly to *Evil Dead II* than to its predecessor. Indeed, the

ing was shifting from drive-ins and grindhouse cinemas to home video and, as Geoff King has noted, at a time when Hollywood studios began to invest again in horror film production after the success of Halloween (see 2005: 7–8). In addition, the film was released as American horror film production was broadly, as Brophy and Hoxter identify, beginning to shift from raw, gritty independent horror to the kind of 'splatstick' horror films that were prevalent in the early to mid-1980s. In this context, *The Evil Dead* could be seen as a film that, because of the lag between its production and release, served as a bridge between these shifts. On the one hand, its employment of a range of scenarios and stylistic elements from horrors past meant that it served as an inventory and summary of dominant trends in the Anglo-American horror film from (if this includes the Hammer Horror references) the late 1950s to the end of the 1970s. However, the film's use of 'mischief gags' and the critical appreciation of its perverse, gory (but possibly unintended) humour meant that it would, ultimately and retrospectively, be identified as one of the progenitors of the 'splatstick' trend that would continue to develop subsequent to *The Evil Dead's* release and success on the home video market.

*The Evil Dead* had generically located itself by drawing on formal patterns and scenarios from a range of previously successful horror films. However, the idiosyncratic tone and stylistic distinctiveness that had emerged from the fusing of these elements in the first film meant that, by the time that *Evil Dead II* went into production, the primary sub-generic template that the filmmakers were working from was *The Evil Dead* itself and the

subsequent 'splatstick' horror comedies that had come in its wake. By focusing on those qualities that had become specifically associated with *The Evil Dead* – its blend of horror and comedy, its hyperbolic use of sound and camerawork, and the 'Shaky Cam' point-of-view shots that Hoxter argues have 'become the signature moments of "Evil Deadness" in the cycle' (1996: 79) – *Evil Dead II* didn't need to rely as heavily on earlier genre precedents because the filmmakers were now much more confident about the kind of film it was and the kind of audience it needed to target. As a consequence and unlike its predecessor, *Evil Dead II* was held up by Bruce Kawin as an exemplar of the purposeful, programmatic cult film, because it was clearly 'addressed to the fans of the horror magazine *Fangoria*' and was 'absolutely confident that its inventiveness and nonstop creativity' would 'be appreciated by that target audience it knows is out there' (1991: 24; emphasis in original). Furthermore, the maximising of the signature qualities and moments of 'Evil Deadness' in *Evil Dead II* also explains why, in academic circles, it is the characteristics of the second film in the trilogy that has largely determined how the trilogy as a whole has been categorised and approached.

This may all seem very pedantic, but, for me, what this illustrates is the fact that a film's sequels can potentially impact on the way in which its predecessor is labelled as cult. In an extremely valuable essay, Matt Hills argues that the identification of a film as 'cult' can be seen as a shifting process that involves ongoing interactions between audiences and fans, film critics, filmmakers, and film industry marketers and publicists. For Hills, what there-

fore 'requires study in each empirical instance is the extent to which any "cult" film is actually designated a cult, by whom, and with what further cultural repercussions or appropriations' (2007: 448).

One of the first identifications of *The Evil Dead* as a cult film was the 1983 review of the film in the Los Angeles Times, on its initial theatrical release in the US. Here, Kevin Thomas begins his review by noting that *The Evil Dead* had 'opened last month in New York amidst furor and long lines' and was thus 'already on its way to becoming a cult film' (1983: K4). Two months earlier, Gerry Putzer in the Hollywood Reporter had concluded his review of the film by noting that it would 'benefit from sporadic engagements on the weekend midnight-show circuit' (1983: 3). This suggests that both of these identifications of *The Evil Dead* as a cult film were informed by a conception of it as a potential 'midnight movie' which would primarily achieve success via repeat viewings in urban theatres in the US. However, *The Evil Dead* would ultimately achieve its greatest success through the then nascent home video market, where its reputation grew, amongst young teenagers, due to its famed grueling and disturbing horrors and, in the UK, because of its impounding by the Obscene Publications Squad and association with the 'video nasties' panic.

*The Evil Dead's* subsequent association with home video and, as the sequels emerged, its status as the second film's rawer, scarier, lower-budget predecessor thus both clearly fed into a shift in the film's cult status. Firstly, the release of Anchor Bay's award-winning Book of the Dead Special Edition

## “ The Evil Dead's status (shifted) from drive-in fodder to the, ultimately, more lucrative domain of the cult horror.

the film's intertextuality, its play with, fusion and consequent subversion of generic and sub-generic conventions, its ideologically ambiguous or transgressive qualities, and its status as an 'accidental' cult film). However, a number of more specific contextual factors have, clearly, also fed into *The Evil Dead's* distinctive cult reputation.

To begin with, there is the issue of *The Evil Dead's* status as a horror film. During the time I have been researching *The Evil Dead* (first as a video nasty and then as a cult film), I have always been struck by the fact that it does not tend to be discussed, at length, in books, articles and chapters that focus on particular trends or

focuses on 'beyondness'. Secondly, Julian Hoxter and Barry Keith Grant have placed the film in the category of the 'splatstick' or 'splatstick' films of the late 1970s and 1980s. However, at least in the case of Hoxter, the definition of 'splatstick films', and *The Evil Dead* trilogy's inclusion in this category, seems largely based on *Evil Dead II* rather than the first film. Hoxter, for instance, focuses on Bruce Campbell's comedic performance in the second film in order to separate *The Evil Dead* trilogy from those slashers whose primary aim is to frighten, such as Halloween or Friday the 13th. In a similar vein, Philip Brophy considers *The Evil Dead* to be a key example of the employment of 'horrority' in the modern horror film (a term that, for him, en-

academic pigeonholing of *The Evil Dead* as an exemplar of 'splatstick' or 'horrority' seems to disregard the film's careful use of suspense, atmosphere and the kind of disturbing, raw qualities that connect the film with Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* and Hooper's *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*.

One possible reason for the fact that *The Evil Dead* has generally been considered in relation to the trilogy as a whole is that the first film was conceived and then released at a transitional stage, in terms of the historical development of the horror film. The film was made as the key exhibition context for independent horror filmmak-

of the film in 2002 served to consolidate *The Evil Dead's* status as a cult film of the video era. In a booklet tucked away in the DVD packaging, Michael Felsher explicitly states that what had predominantly made *The Evil Dead* a cult classic, and perpetuated its cult reputation through the years, was its status as a video hit, with Felsher then going on to discuss the film's cult history through an account of the variety of video, laserdisc and DVD versions of *The Evil Dead* that had been available since the film's initial video release (see 2002: 5–6). In this respect, *The Evil Dead's* shifting status as cult related not only to the fact that it initiated the style and tone which would subsequently come to be associated with the trilogy as a whole, but also to the fact that it could be identified as a pioneering example of a cult film which had predominantly been experienced on video rather than in the context of a midnight movie screening.

Secondly, the first film had something that was missing from the film's two sequels: a particularly distinctive, engaging and entertaining making of story. As Bill Warren notes, in a Video Watchdog article, 'the emphasis' in his *The Evil Dead Companion* book, 'was always intended to be on the first film in the series, because the story of its production ... is much more interesting than the stories of the other two' (1998: 23). This appealing characteristic of many low-budget cult films was thus effectively harnessed not only in Warren's book but in the Raimi, Tapert and Campbell commentaries that accompanied the Elite and Anchor Bay DVD versions of the film. On the one hand, this illustrates how the production histories of low-budget independent films can be distinctly DVD-friendly,

assisting in the perpetuation of a film's long-term cult reputation. On the other, it illustrates the potential for low-budget, independent cult films to be appreciated and experienced not only intertextually – in terms of 'how a film invites comparison, connections and linkages with other films' (Mathijs & Mendik 2008: 3) – but also extra-textually (or even meta-textually). As noted in chapter 2, a key way in which *The Evil Dead* has come to be appreciated is not just in terms of its references to previous horror films but in relation to its gruelling and eventful production. The extra-text of the film's making of story has thus allowed many fans to overlook the film's flaws and inconsistencies, to feel inspired to make films of their own and, in some cases, to state a preference for the first film over its sequels not only because of its 'claustrophobic, cold, distant hopelessness' and 'the handson, rough hewn look of the special effects' but also because of 'the gambles that Sam Raimi took' (Steven Nyland, New York, 27 May 2006). If, as Telotte argues, the cult status of a number of classical Hollywood films relates to the fact that they include film stars (Humphrey Bogart, James Dean, Joan Crawford) who function as 'admired, idealised images' for particular audience members (Christopher Lasch in Telotte 1991: 9), then the equivalent 'admired, idealised images' amongst many of *The Evil Dead's* most devoted fans are not the film's stars but the three Renaissance partners who serve as the protagonists of the film's production, financing and distribution story.

Furthermore, the related extra-text of the DVD commentary has allowed these production stories and the appealing, funny, self-deprecating personalities of the three filmmakers to become a significant part of the cult

experience of watching *The Evil Dead*. On the one hand, these commentaries invite viewers to appreciate the film through the context of the Renaissance filmmaking universe as a whole and thus, potentially, to enhance the potential to read and appreciate *The Evil Dead* as a self-conscious, reflexive piece of moviemaking (through its references, for instance, to Sam Raimi's Oldsmobile car and his brother, Ted, whose appearances graced *The Evil Dead*, the sequels and the majority of Raimi's subsequent films). On the other, the self-deprecating way in which the Renaissance partners draw attention to *The Evil Dead's* mistakes and inconsistencies and recount the struggles and experiences that informed particular scenes can be seen to work, potentially, to contain any criticisms that could be made of the film's flaws, to allow audiences to feel closer to these fallible and human filmmakers and to enhance the distinctly non-mainstream nature of the film. The DVD commentaries continuously note that particular production strategies would not be permitted 'nowadays' or that *The Evil Dead* includes particular shots that you just wouldn't 'get in normal movies' (see Raimi & Tapert 2002; Campbell 2002a). Such comments work to solidify *The Evil Dead's* distinct appeal as a film that can be loved for its flaws as well its innovations. The stories and memories that are associated with particular parts of the film serve to authenticate and consolidate the first film's specific appeal and status, amongst fans, as a 'raw' piece of horror filmmaking which can more easily be opposed to 'diluted' Hollywood horrors than the film's two sequels. Other factors and issues clearly feed into this status. Most prominently, the film's censorship history in the UK has been emphasised in a range of

extras produced specifically for the UK market by Anchor Bay, and this has served to maintain and perpetuate another key distinction between the first and second *Evil Dead* films: the transgressive and controversial aspects of the first film, which have enhanced the film's reputation as a particularly disturbing horror film.

Matt Hills has argued that 'to view "cult" status only as a strategy of "anti-mainstream" cultural distinction' is to 'downplay ... the extent to which many cult films invoke cross-generic "textual strategies"' associated with popular film and popular culture (2007: 446). While, as illustrated throughout this book, Raimi and company clearly attempted to balance the use of generic conventions with the kind of artistic and stylistic innovations more commonly associated with independent filmmaking, the inevitable comparisons made between the first film and its equally popular and equally

cult sequel have clearly fed into the amplification of what is distinctly cult about the first film. When Rebecca and Sam Umland state their preference for *Evil Dead II* over its predecessor or, as noted in chapter 2, when fans of the *Evil Dead* sequels note that the first film is just as, or even more, cult than the second two films, they seem to be drawing implicitly on the distinction employed in Telotte, Kawin and Eco's writings on cult film. This, broadly, is a distinction between the more accidental, unplanned 'organically imperfect' cult film (Eco 2008: 68), and the more programmatic cult film that purposefully and 'deliberately set[s] out to engage, address, and patronise a cult audience' (Kawin 1991: 20).

The fact that *The Evil Dead* emerged at a transitional moment in horror film production, and (in terms of the commencement of home video) a transitional moment in the reception of cult films, clearly informs this distinction, as do the textual qualities

of the two films themselves and the way this is informed by the growth of Raimi and company from, as Bill Warren notes, 'college students' to experienced, 'hardened' filmmaking 'veterans' (1998: 23). However, the existence of *The Evil Dead's* two sequels, and the continued appeal and proliferation of the film's DVD-friendly making of story, has served to amplify this distinction, helping to make *The Evil Dead* 'a great example' to its fans 'of what young determined filmmakers can do' (dave\_andres, Michigan, 6 August 2004) and giving the film a distinct place within the wider *Evil Dead* universe of sequels and spin-offs. Consequently, and at the very least, the case of *The Evil Dead* illustrates one way in which not only video but also DVD is coming to play a significant role in the shifting processes through which particular films maintain and augment their cult reputations.-



Fans overlook the film's flaws and inconsistencies, to feel inspired to make films of their own.

This article first appeared in Egan's book *The Evil Dead* (2011) and reproduced here with the permission of the author.

## Schedule

### 5 pm Exhibition

A public exhibition of the Video Nasties and related ephemera from the pre-certificate period - literally the period before certification was a requirement for a film to be released on home video. Many of these were subject to destruction under the orders of the Department of Public Prosecutions and, 40 years later, are incredibly rare.

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### 6 pm Public Lecture

A public lecture delivered by Dr McKenna, associate professor of film and media industries and author of *Nasty Business: The Marketing and Distribution of the Video Nasties* (2020), *Snuff* (2023), and the edited collection *Horror Franchise Cinema* (2022).

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### 7 pm Film Screening

A special Halloween screening of Sam Raimi's low budget horror and cult classic, *The Evil Dead*. The definitive cabin in the woods film in which a group of young people inadvertently unleash the forces of darkness and, one by one, are turned into rampaging zombies.

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## My Thanks

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