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TF

24th June 1983

Thank you for your letter of 23rd June, together with the enclosed letter to the Prime Minister.

I will, of course, ensure that she sees this as soon as possible.

Derek Howe  
Political Office

Mrs Mary Whitehouse CBE

NATIONAL  
VIEWERS'  
AND  
LISTENERS'  
ASSOCIATION

ARDLEIGH, COLCHESTER, ESSEX, CO7 7RH  
Tel. Colchester (0206) 230123

PRESIDENT:  
MRS. MARY WHITEHOUSE, C.B.E.

ORGANISING SECRETARY:  
Mr. John C. Beyer

Ach

23.6.83

Mr. D. Howe,  
10 Downing Street  
London S.W.1

Dear Denis,

Just to say how delighted I  
was to see you in the House of  
Lords (on telly!) on Wednesday.

Secondly to ask if you  
could ensure, with your usual  
kindness, that the Prime Minister  
receives the enclosed letter? I

would be most grateful -

With very best wishes -

Yours ever,  
Mary

HON. TREASURER:  
Mr. R. C. Standring,  
Still Waters, Pine Walk, East Horsley,  
Leatherhead, Surrey, KT24 5AG  
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# NATIONAL VIEWERS' AND LISTENERS' ASSOCIATION

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The Rt. Hon. Mrs. M. Thatcher MP  
The Prime Minister  
10 Downing Street,  
LONDON SW1.

23rd June, 1983

*Dear Mrs Thatcher*

It was with deep disappointment that I heard no reference during the Queen's speech yesterday to the legislation promised in your election manifesto to control "obscenity and offences against public decency" with particular reference to "video nasties".

This omission was foreshadowed by press reports (e.g. Sunday Telegraph 19th June) to the effect that the Government would be waiting to see if the video industry would "put its own house in order", reports which we dismissed as incorrect in the light of the promise which has been so uncompromisingly made in your manifesto, and to which I referred so many times in the visits we paid to marginal seats during the election campaign.

May I therefore ask if you can tell us when that promise will be fulfilled? Our anxiety is twofold. On the one hand it is clear that with every day that passes children and young people are increasingly at risk (see attached press cutting 'Boy's Nights of Terror'). On the other hand the video trade itself have gone on record as saying that they have misgivings as to whether such a voluntary code could or would work. We are aware from our contacts with the Video Trade Association that there are many responsible people who wish it to work but would find a voluntary code impossible to administer.

I attach also an article by John Sanders, former Editor of Video Trade International, and would draw your attention particularly to the words underlined on P.12 and in particular to the view of Mr. Derek Mann, VTA's chief executive, to the effect that "a voluntary code as proposed by BVA and BBFC was only likely to be adopted by the 10,000 or so legitimate dealers and TV rental chains. Meanwhile an extra 5,000 shops dealing with videograms as a sideline were, on the face of it, unlikely to comply with the code."

cont. . . .

#### PATRONS:

SIR CYRIL W. BLACK, J.P., D.L., F.R.I.C.S.  
VICE-ADMIRAL BASIL BROOK, C.B., C.B.E.  
PROFESSOR G. N. M. COLLINS

J. AUDREY ELLISON, B.Sc., Secretary Royal Society of Health  
THE VERY REV. JOHN R. GRAY, V.R.D., M.A., D.D.,  
Minister at Dunblane Cathedral, Ex Moderator  
Church of Scotland  
THE EARL OF HALSBURY, F.R.S.  
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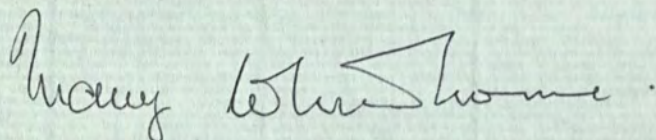
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MAJOR-GENERAL D. N. WIMBERLEY, C.B., D.S.O.,  
M.C., D.L., LL.D.  
THE RT. REV. M. A. P. WOOD, D.S.C., M.A., R.N.R.,  
Bishop of Norwich



Because of our very close involvement in this issue we are already receiving anxious, even cynical, enquiries. We would very much like to be in a position to re-assure our members and others that the Government does indeed intend to take very early action on this matter and would be most grateful for any assurance you can give us to this effect.

With best wishes.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Mary Whitehouse". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the typed name.

Mary Whitehouse  
President.

c.c. to Mr. Leon Brittan



## RATING

# Censorship — what are the real options?

The system of classifying videograms due to be imposed on dealers from September, is not the only, or the best way, argues John Sanders

As if piracy, price cutting and the appearance of the friendly neighbourhood fast-food-and-video-cassette emporium were not enough to concern the video dealer, there is now the spectre of video censorship stalking the high streets. The reason that the British Videogram Association gives as its excuse to inflict a Videogram Standards Council upon video dealers is that, in the words of BVA chairman Donald MacLean: "If this voluntary system is not seen to be effective, the government will impose some form of statutory control".

So, the choice, according to BVA is a simple one from two alternatives: the trade should accept the censorship scheme put forward by BVA and the British Board of Film Censors, which will almost certainly set the same standards adopted by cinemas, or that which the pre-election Conservative government would impose on the trade.

One point on which almost everyone seems to agree is that censorship, or more accurately, certification, is sorely needed. Donald Maclean, again, sums up the needs of certification as fourfold:

- to give the individual consumer the means of making a more informed choice;
- to restrict the access of youngsters to

videograms containing material which most people would regard as potentially harmful;

- to enable the attention of the police, in their enforcement of the Obscene Publications Acts and other legislation, to be concentrated on material not classified under the scheme;

- to enable publishers, distributors and retailers of videograms to avoid dealing in products likely to contravene the law.

OK, so what is it that BVA, BBFC and the newly-formed Videogram Standards Council want to impose on dealers and the industry in general? Well, the cinema industry recently adopted a five-tier system for classifying movies — U (Universal), PG (requiring parental guidance) 15 (restricted to 15-year olds and over, 18 (restricted to 18-year olds and over in premises licensed under the Local Government [Miscellaneous Provisions] 1982 Act — the sex shops Act). It is proposed that videocassettes should bear the same classification labels.

### Lurid covers

At last dealers will be able to tell customers whether a particular cassette is suitable for children. No longer will the police be confused by a lurid cover concealing an innocuous movie (or vice-versa). Hooray? No.

Firstly the proposed system has several shortcomings.

1. It doesn't recognise the principle that what people choose to watch in their own homes is their own business. Incredibly, BVA claim that they too support the notion that the viewer's home is his private castle. Norman Abbott, BVA's chief executive, went



Martin Leelan

out of his way to stress this when he spoke at the VTA conference at Brighton (see page 15). Alas, such fine words are only words. BVA members do not produce movies which would fall foul of Mr James Ferman, the boss of the BBFC censors. At least not in a way which would significantly affect cassette revenue.

Certainly, without changes to the proposed system many movies now obtainable on cassette will fail to get a certificate. And the *Restricted 18* certificate will be of no use for semisoft porn. Where premises require a special licence, local councils will normally be reluctant to issue them. Even when such licences are issued, ordinary members of the public (and the experience of most video dealers is that sex movies are hired by seemingly perfectly ordinary people) will of course find it most awkward, probably impossible, to enter such premises in the full view of their neighbours.

One dealer asks: "What are BVA getting at anyway? If we are supposed not to hire out certain categories of cassettes to certain age groups, what offence is it to the general public that another category is included? The

## The censorship scheme controversy

This April the British Videogram Association announced at a press conference that it had consulted the British Board of Film Censors and had decided to impose on the video industry a 'voluntary' code of censorship for videograms. Certificates would be granted by a still-to-be-appointed Videogram Standards Council which would reflect exactly the standards adopted by the BBFC for cinema films.

BVA added that their 40 or so members would all adopt the new system from September 1983 and any other distributor could use the system. After an initial period any dealer stocking non-certificated material would be proscribed and would no longer receive BVA members' videograms.

To simplify the process, documentaries and other harmless material could be certified by the distributors as being of the 'U'

category without formality. The backlog of titles on distributors' shelves would receive certificates over the course of the first three years of the system's operation.

The announcement so astounded the retail trade that a special conference was organised by the Video Trade Association at Brighton in order to clarify what appeared to be a diktat by BVA.

Derek Mann, VTA's chief executive, explained to the conference that a voluntary code as proposed by BVA and BBFC was only likely to be adopted by the 10,000 or so legitimate dealers and TV rental chains. Meanwhile an extra 5,000 shops dealing with videograms as a sideline were, on the face of it, unlikely to comply with the code. It was clear from Mann's speech and from the many questions from the floor that dealers were extremely unhappy with the proposed system.



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cassettes after all can't be viewed in the shop. Youngsters won't be able to get hold of them — so what is the need for a special entrance and a special licence? It would be different if we were to sell sex aids, pornographic books and the like, members of the public might be offended and it would be an unsuitable place for children. But provided the inlay cards on the cassette boxes aren't offensive, what is the need to further restrict them?"

**It doesn't effectively classify the movie.** Certainly it gives a rough guide to the suitability for showing the movie to children, but if we are going to the trouble of providing a system which will "give the consumer the means of making a more informed choice" then let's do it properly with ratings for the degree of nudity, horror and bad language as well. At the same time the distributor should help the consumer by saying whether the movie has been dubbed or has subtitles, and the dealer by publishing the movie's UK distribution history (Cinema, TV etc.).

**It is going to cost a lot of money.** One informed estimate puts the cost to the distributor at around £300 per certificate. Who pays? The distributor pays the £300 to the standards council, the dealer pays a higher price for the cassette (probably an extra £1 for titles with a small production run), and the result is that the smaller distributors become even less competitive (however, smaller distributors do not generally belong to BVA so that's all right then) and the customer has a more limited choice. One estimate puts the revenue to the standards council in a typical year at £100,000 plus the cost of certification of the backlog of several thousand titles already in the shops.

So where did BVA go wrong? Simply by failing to consult the industry. They quite rightly diagnosed that something was desperately needed to classify video movies, but because seven leading member companies of BVA are subsidiaries of major Hollywood studios, much of the style of these studios has rubbed off on BVA. In America, the studios are used to dictating to the "movie theaters" on all matters of distribution, cost, and performance. That the

same style is prevalent here, one has only to consider the reply of Warner's David Rozzalla who, when asked how long it now takes to become a registered Warner dealer, said last month: "Three months. We're in no hurry to get new dealers. We have over 2,000 dealers at the moment and that's probably all we need".

The new VSC system presents several new worries for dealers:

**1. Many thousands of less-than-scrupulous dealers will not comply with the system.** They will continue to rent cassettes along with the groceries with little regard to the age of the renter. So parents faced with a tiresome trip to the video shop will send their sixteen-year-olds to hire 18-rated movies from wherever the dealer will comply. The conscientious specialist dealer will lose custom.

**2. Some cassettes will fail certification.** Titles which today represent a considerable investment for many dealers, TCX, Electric Blue, etc and which contribute a steady income for many dealers, will suddenly become "illegal".

**3. A new area of prosecution is created.** Hiring cassettes to minors. At the moment, there have been no convictions relating to this offence. Although such a move is commendable it does add to the risks faced by the legitimate dealer, who now faces a risk of prosecution like a publican or a cinema owner.

## An end to seizure?

There is one big advantage in favour of the scheme — it seems most likely that it will be accepted by the police as establishing the bona fides of a videogram.

One popular myth is that the police have nothing better to do than raid shops looking for pornographic cassettes. In reality, the police are in an invidious position. If they do nothing they are accused of at best condoning the crime of pornography and at worst of being in league with pornographers, and on the other hand they are accused of harassing legitimate businessmen whenever they do investigate a complaint.

Rupert Ormerod, Assistant Chief Constable for Devon and Cornwall, describes this dilemma as making the police the "jam in the sandwich". Mr Ormerod says: "Certification is very definitely necessary for the industry. Censorship is a form of social legislation and is very unproductive for the police to initiate. Video certificates will make the task of my officers easier."

At the moment anyone with a dislike of a certain dealer — a rival perhaps — or a very zealous person can complain to the police that he or she has been offended by the nature of movies offered for hire in a shop. The police are then practically obliged to investigate the complaint. They go into the shop and what do they see? Many hundreds



of cassettes, some with titles and covers suggesting that they contain material of a macabre or sexual nature likely to breach the Obscene Publications Act.

After all, one can hardly blame a distributor of a sex movie which has been imported from the USA and suffered massive cuts by him in an attempt at self-censorship, for at least dressing up the cover with a deceptive picture and description. He is hardly going to put: "Mandy goes to Baltimore is the bowlderised version of the celebrated American pornographic movie. It contains a weak story line which in the original version was somewhat mitigated by the many scenes of explicit sex. However the present version merely shows a few burns and tits, is poorly edited, has lost 40 per cent of its content and remains a movie with a weak story line."

So, it is argued, if the police were presented with movies that had an "official" censor rating they would be spared from trying to guess whether the cassette was dodgy enough to warrant seizure. Furthermore, it is argued, if a dealer were only to stock movies with a VSC certificate the police would, in practice, leave the shop alone. Another advantage to the dealer is that the system will be applied uniformly over the whole country. No longer will dealers in one police area be able to stock a title freely while those a few miles down the road are prosecuted for dealing in the same title. So from the point of view of the relations with the police, at least, certification will be welcomed.

However, the police are looking for a reliable system — any reliable system — not necessarily the BVA-BBFC system. Of course, no one denies that the VSC system is a considerable improvement on no system at all. What is clear is that it is so imperfect that it should be carefully reappraised before it is thrust upon us.

**What are the alternatives?** BVA constantly claim that a voluntary scheme cannot be as harsh as a compulsory one. However, it is extremely difficult to see how a government scheme could be more draconian. It is unlikely that the government would introduce a separate official censorship





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board — this would undermine the BBFC and the system now in operation in the cinema industry. So probably the government would appoint a censor panel indistinguishable from the proposed VSC. This panel would at least have the force of law — offering full and certain protection for the dealer against prosecution. It would no doubt incorporate the present BBFC so that all movie certificates would be protected by law.

Whatever scheme the government of the day imposes, it will have to begin by categorising cassettes and then drawing the line where it thinks they fall within the ambit of public decency. Not an easy task, especially given the complexity of the obscene publications legislation.

But what does the industry as a whole want to have?

- Classification of titles to let the customer know what he is getting. Bad language, nudity etc can spoil an evening's family viewing. Many families find such material embarrassing rather than offensive.

- Classification of titles to protect children.
- Full history of UK release (for the dealer).
- Technical classification — running time, whether dubbed, etc.

- Sanctions against dealers (but perhaps also against parents) who let unsuitable material fall into the hands of children.

- Apart from 'nasties' and movies gratuitously depicting sexual perversions there should be no restrictions on what is permitted to be offered to adults. Thus 'Restricted 18' movies would be normally available to video shop customers. If such a classification is to exist at all, then there seems no excuse for forbidding it in some shops but not others.

- All video shops should be licensed. Dealers persistently infringing censorship practice (and pirates) would have their licences withdrawn and would not be permitted to trade.

- Establishment of a Videogram Classification Panel which would draw up guidelines for self certification in all categories so that

producers and distributors could label their own movies. The panel would arbitrate where a dealer or member of the public complains that the certification is inaccurate and would provide compulsory certification for distributors who persist in labelling inaccurately. This would provide an inexpensive way of providing a comprehensive classification scheme while safeguarding dealers and the public from the unlikely possibility of unscrupulous distributors.

- This structure for video censorship should carry the weight of law. Local councils should have the powers to grant licences, dealers should be compelled (after a suitable period) to carry only certificated stock, prevent unauthorised material from reaching children, and avoid counterfeiting and piracy.

**\*Be sure to write to or telephone Network with your opinion. Editor George McDonald will be glad to listen to your views: Telephone: 021-622 5994. Or write to Network, Third Floor, Spencer House, Digbeth High Street, Birmingham B5 6DD.**

## Readers' survey

Please complete the questionnaire below and send it to Readers Voice, Network, Inter City Publications Ltd, Third Floor, Spencer House, Digbeth, Birmingham B5 6DD

Please Tick Boxes

Are you or do you work for a: film manufacturer/distributor  video wholesaler  video library (retailer)

Do you believe a system of classifying video films should be introduced: YES  NO

Please complete the rest of the questionnaire even if you answered NO to the above question as it is likely that some sort of classification system will be introduced and your views are, therefore, still valid.

Should a classification system be administered/enforced by:

Government  Local Councils   
 Distributors Organisation (eg BVA)  Left to the retailer   
 Retailers Organisation (eg VTA)

Do you have your own system of classification: YES  NO

If YES please give brief details .....

If a classification system was introduced by the Government should it be: Voluntary  Compulsory

If a classification system was compulsory what maximum penalties should there be if the 'rules' were broken:

Loss of licence (if they are introduced)  Fine £100 or greater   
 Fine less than £20  Imprisonment   
 Fine less than £100

Do you feel that any national video organisation has the right to impose classifications: YES  NO

If YES which organisation .....

Do you feel that the majority of video library owners are responsible people and need no external body to impose classifications:

YES  NO

In some cases we will follow up people for their further views on the subject. If you feel that you might like to take part in a follow up could you please enter your name and address below. This will, of course, be treated with the strictest confidence and anything you say will not be revealed unless we have your permission.

Name ..... Position .....

Address .....

..... Telephone number.....



AR, WEDNESDAY, MAY 18, 1983

# Boy's nights of terror

By Chris Russon

A scene from a horror video screened to a kiddie audience at a Walsall club drove a young boy to live in fear of a mutilated corpse bursting from a bedroom cupboard.

The boy was so terrified he locked his wardrobe, hid the key and refused to go into his bedroom.

Even now the child is too afraid to sleep in the dark — eight months after seeing the terrifying movie.

The boy's parents told today how their 11-year-old son became obsessed with a frightening scene from the film. And a leading child doctor has warned that youngsters watching such movies run the risk of severe psychological damage.

The boy saw Friday the 13th — a gory

adults-only movie. His parents say he came home crying after watching the movie at the Sheffield Working Mens' Club last October.

His mother said that her son had become very nervous and reacted even to "mild" scenes of violence on television. "He is even frightened by scenes in videos that are approved for children," she added.

## 'Mild' scenes

"I feel very angry that he was allowed to watch such filth. What has happened to him in these past months has been very traumatic. I am sure what he saw that night could have a lasting effect on him."

The boy's parents had to consult their family doctor to help their child break away from the memory of the film.

The boy was one of more than 150-children, aged between ten and 18, who regularly watched X-rated film shows at the club in Lichfield Road.

Police raided the building last November after parents complained about the weekly

terror shows. Police found more than 150 youngsters, most in their early teens, watching *The Wanderers* — a bloody X-rater about American gang warfare, packed with foul language.

Today the ten members of the club committee became the first people to be prosecuted under the Cinematographic Amendment Act which came into force last October, outlawing the showing of films to paying public audiences unless clubs hold a council licence — costing £82.

The club started its Wednesday night shows last summer, renting videos of horror films and showing them on a 4ft screen. For 20p children were allowed into the club to see scenes of violence and sex normally restricted to adult cinema audiences.

The films included *The Exorcist*, *Death Race 2000*, *Rocky 2 and 3*, *Halloween 1 and 2*, *Bloody Moon*, *Carrie*, *Quadrophenia*, and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*.

News of the video nights quickly spread among the youngsters in the area. Police

found one teenager who had seen 15 films at the club. Most of the youngsters had been to at least five of the horror shows.

Dr Ian Young, consultant paediatrician at Walsall's Manor Hospital, today warned that many youngsters ran the risk of prolonged psychological damage by being subjected to horror scenes.

He urged parents to make sure their youngsters never had the chance to watch such violent films. "It can be very damaging for children of such young ages to be shown scenes of extreme violence," said Dr Young.

## New legislation

A police spokesman said: "Some of these films shown to children would be found disgusting even by adult audiences. The fact that such horror can be shown to youngsters, sometimes with alarming results, is proof that the new legislation must be enforced."

"Films in this country are censored to be shown to specified age groups and that principle must be upheld."