

‘The horror film to end all horror films’: *10 Rillington Place* and the British Board of Film Censors’ (BBFC) shifting policy on true crime

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At the beginning of the 1970s, the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC) changed its longstanding policy on refusing to certify films that portrayed real crimes and court cases that happened within the past fifty years. BBFC Secretary John Trevelyan (1958-71) – who was ‘widely (though not entirely) regarded as a liberalising force in film censorship’ (Hargreaves 2012: 54) – explained in his memoir, *What the Censor Saw* (1973: 161), that the policy was changed for *10 Rillington Place* (Richard Fleischer, 1971), a British film based on the crimes and eventual conviction of London serial killer John Christie in the 1940s and 1950s. As this chapter will detail, however, this shift in policy was not reactive, but was the culmination of ten years of contention between the BBFC and a variety of British and American producers and writers (including Ludovic Kennedy, author of source true crime book *10 Rillington Place* [1961]) wishing to make a film based on the Christie case, as well as ongoing consultation between the BBFC and the Home Office, the BBC (who had changed their own policy for the television news programme *Panorama* in the late 1960s), the Independent Television Authority (ITA) and a range of legal advisors. The BBFC files for *10 Rillington Place* are extremely valuable in mapping the gradual shift in policy as they contain correspondence not only for the 1971 film, but for a number of abandoned projects relating to the Christie case that date back to the start of the 1960s.

From 1961, the BBFC blocked numerous Christie projects by filmmakers, who ranged from *Thunderball* producer Kevin McClory to American production company CBS Films to the son of well-known British director Roy Boulting, despite their evolving

strategies to sell their productions as explorations of the British justice system, serious psychological studies, and indictments of mental health provision in Britain. For the BBFC, a Christie film raised ongoing issues, less of sensationalism and copycat crimes than of balancing their assumed ethical and moral roles in preserving the rights to free comment and criticism whilst protecting the industry and audiences. This included protecting the families of victims and perpetrators from further distress, but also defending filmmakers from libel charges or other legal disputes. Trevelyan stressed in a letter to the production company Filmways that a film based on the Christie case might be ‘regarded as a contempt of court, and involve film distributors and exhibitors (and possibly the producers) in court proceedings’ (Trevelyan, 1970b).¹ However, the ongoing pressure to tell the Christie story prompted Trevelyan, only part successfully, to steer the project into the hands of ‘a reputable British producer and director’, and to instigate a new policy in which each case was considered ‘individually and on its own merits’ (Trevelyan 1970b). This chapter builds upon research undertaken on censorship of British horror and crime films in the ‘long Sixties’ (Marwick 2005; Frith 2019; Snelson and Macauley 2020). As a result, it offers new insights into the policies, processes and practices of the BBFC; contextualising censorship within historical debates about representations of crime and justice; and highlighting the interactions between the BBFC, the film and television industries, and the State.

The BBFC and true crime in the 1960s

Cinematic depictions of factual murder cases stretch back to the mid-1910s, but Alfred Hitchcock’s 1926 silent film *The Lodger: A Story of the London Fog* (based upon Marie Belloc Lowndes’ 1913 novel based on Jack the Ripper) was the first narrative focusing on the crimes and detection of a serial killer as its main subject.² *The Lodger* was remade four times, including an almost shot-for-shot sound version in 1931, and the Ripper inspired dozens of other, mostly,

American, British and German films. This recycling of the Ripper fits the pre-1950s model of literary true crime revisiting the same cases. Jean Murley explains that ‘until the 1950s, literary true crime consisted of warmed-over collections of old and tired cases, and murder narration outside of the magazines stagnated’ (2008: 51). Murley also highlights this mid-century period as the moment when true crime began to establish the psychological and biographical conventions we identify with it and, largely as a result, its recognition as a serious literary and, to a lesser extent, filmic genre. In shifting towards the individual biographies and psychologies of recent murderers, late-1950s and 1960s true crime writing drew upon and aligned itself with recent psychological developments in trying to understand, even empathise with, the personal histories that led the psychopathic and sociopathic personality disorders driving these individuals (or in some cases pairs of individuals) to kill.

To become a respectable literary genre, therefore, the repetition and seriality of earlier crime writing was eschewed for explorations of highly topical crimes-in-context and the individual psychologies and circumstances that produced them. This shift in approach was also adopted in American cinema. Richard Fleischer – the director of *The Boston Strangler* (1968) and *10 Rillington Place* – arguably instigated this psychological shift in *Compulsion* (1959), based on the 1920s Leopold and Loeb case, taking its name and psychological detail from Meyer Levin’s 1956 best-selling book of the same name.³ Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960) was pioneering, however, in being based, via Robert Bloch’s 1959 novel, upon a very recent and particularly gruesome serial killer, Ed Gein, whose murders were committed from 1954-57, and in establishing the prototype for future cinematic depictions of the pitiable psychopath. Murley sees this mode as becoming ‘fully embodied’, however, in Truman Capote’s non-fiction novel *In Cold Blood* (1966) and Gerold Frank’s *The Boston Strangler* (1966), and reaching its ‘full frightening potential in film versions of these books’ (154). This cycle of best-selling true crime books depicting recent homicide cases emerged to feed public interest in the

phenomenal escalation and shift in the nature of murder in the United States.⁴ The concurrent suspension of the Hollywood Production Code in 1967, and its replacement with an age-based classification system in October 1968, allowed them to be adapted for the screen (Monaco 2001: 56-66). This cycle of New Hollywood films included: *In Cold Blood* (Richard Brooks, 1967) (based upon Capote's book on Dick Hickock and Perry Smith's 1959 Clutter family murders), *The Boston Strangler* (based upon Frank's book claiming that Albert DeSalvo was the strangler of thirteen women from 1962 to 1964), *No Way To Treat a Lady* (Jack Smight, 1968) (an adaptation of William Goldman's 1964 novel inspired by the Boston Strangler), *Targets* (Peter Bogdanovich, 1968) (based on the 1966 University of Texas sniper Charles Whitman), *Bloody Mama* (Roger Corman, 1970) (based on 1930s crime matriarch Kate 'Ma' Baker) and *The Honeymoon Killers* (Leonard Kastle, 1970) (based upon the 1940s 'lonely hearts killers' Raymond Fernandez and Martha Beck).

In his memoir, Trevelyan claimed that the BBFC had 'no reservations about reconstruction of actual murder case in other countries' (1973: 161), but these American films did raise issues for the BBFC and all of them were given X ratings. Some were subject to extremely lengthy consultation processes (*Bloody Mama* was refused certification for over a year) and cuts in order to attain a certification that, at that time, would have permitted sixteen year-olds to see them. For *The Boston Strangler*, for example, Trevelyan consulted three psychiatrists. Twentieth Century Fox predicted difficulty in attaining certification in Britain and contacted the BBFC at script stage to attempt to avert lengthy cuts to the final film. Dr Derek Miller, a psychiatrist from the Adolescent Department at the Tavistock Clinic, was consulted at this stage and produced an eight-page report on the script for Fox producer Stephen Lions suggesting a number of changes that corrected dangerous representation of sexual perversion and inaccuracy in clinical details. When the rough cut of the film was submitted, Trevelyan put on a screening for Miller, the BBFC's go-to psychiatric expert Dr

Stephen Black, and Dr Arthur Hyatt Williams, a psychiatrist in the prison service and the Tavistock Clinic who specialised in violent crime. Trevelyan reported back to Lions that:

All three of the psychiatrists said that this was a brilliant film in many ways. They were, however, unanimous in their view that we would be advised to remove as far as possible certain sections of the film which dealt with sexual perversions, and especially those involving sadism. They regarded this kind of material as being potentially dangerous to disturbed individuals who might see the film. (Trevelyan 1968b)

As a result, the psychiatrists advocated for the editing or cutting of a number of scenes of sexual violence from the first two thirds of the film in order to attain an X rating.

The UK release of the film, in May 1969, prompted a backlash within the middlebrow press that questioned ‘should this film be shown here?’ (Davis 1969) and called on Trevelyan to justify his decision to pass the film, even with an X rating (Hibbin 1969). He explained that following criticism for censoring films based on potential libel claims, the BBFC had changed their policy, instead putting the ‘onus on the film company’ to obtain court clearance, as had been done in this case (Davis 1969). However, a number of British reviews questioned the ethics and even legality of making a film that made a claim to an individual’s guilt when they had not been convicted of these crimes in court. DeSalvo was arrested and sentenced in 1967 for a series of rapes in Boston (attributed to the ‘Green Man’) in 1964, but was never convicted of the stranglings and sexual assaults attributed to the Boston Strangler despite confessing to these crimes later whilst in custody. As the *Daily Express* explained, ‘the remarkable aspect of this movie is that, although no one has ever been brought to trial for these murders, the killer is named’ (Davis 1969). Derek Malcolm’s *Guardian* review expressed extreme conflict at Fleischer’s film, an ‘object lesson in how to make a patently sincere but palpably dishonest film’ (Malcolm 1969). Fleischer is commended for his sociological rather than sensationalising

approach to the material, which culminates in Tony Curtis as DeSalvo ‘staring zombie-like’ into camera in the white cell of a mental institution with a superimposed onscreen directive (or disclaimer): ‘This film has ended but the responsibility of society for the early recognition and treatment of the violent amongst us has yet to begin’ (figure 1). However, the underlying ethical issue of using an entertainment film to assert the guilt of a multiple-murder suspect who is yet to be tried in court for those crimes is seen to completely compromise its purported moral stance: ‘if one starts to think, one ceases to be entertained’ (Malcolm 1969).

If, in America, the true crime cycle developed as a response to The Boston Strangler – as well as the violent media climate of a number of high-profile political assassinations and the Vietnam War – then in Britain, it must be understood as emerging in the context of the national trauma of the Moors murders. The shocking details of child murder and molestation committed by Ian Brady and Myra Hindley from 1963-1965 were revealed and reflected upon across daily newspapers, television news bulletins, magazine articles and books during and following their 1966 trial (Cummins et al 2019: 32). Out of the trial emerged a key critical debate in British media and literary circles: was it ethical, or even possible, to try to understand the motivations and psychology of these killers? Pamela Hansford Johnson, author of *On Iniquity: Some Personal Reflections Arising Out of the Moors Murder Trial* (1967), concluded that ‘empathy in this case is impossible. One cannot imagine oneself into the situation of Hindley and Brady, far less into their heads’ (Hansford Johnson 1966). It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that the announcement that ‘controversial young American director’ William Friedkin was making a film about the lives of the Moors murderers in 1968 was received unfavourably by the British trade papers and newspapers, politicians and the public. In June 1968, *Kine Weekly* columnist Derek Todd discussed the cycle of Hollywood true crime films detailed above, but warned that ‘we are on the brink of a more disturbing development: a number of semi-documentary features examining recent real life murders of a peculiarly sensational kind’ (Todd 1968b). The two

films he used to evidence this claim were Friedkin's Moors murder film and CBS's planned *10 Rillington Place* adaptation, stating that this 'new trend' raised ethical questions for filmmakers, censors and audiences. He suggested that 'The time has come, it seems to me, when film-makers must ask themselves: are human tragedies recently retailed in the quiet of a courtroom – and still sounding harmonics of horror – quite the right material to exploit for presentation to a mass audience?' (Todd 1968b). Friedkin challenged Todd's ethical and aesthetic concerns over this 'bombshell' project by responding in a subsequent *Kine Weekly* article that the film would be based upon the factual accounts of Emlyn Williams's best-selling and, mostly, well received true crime book *Beyond Belief* (1967). Countering medium specific concerns, he stated that he would avoid a 'Hollywood' approach by filming in colour but "totally desaturated" to remove from it any unsuitable element of gloss' (Friedkin quoted in Todd 1968a)

Controversy over the film did not resonate outside of the trade presses for a further six months, when the *Guardian* reported that Labour MP Robert Sheldon would be raising a question in Parliament the following day 'because of anger in the constituency about the proposed film' (Greenhalg 1968). Sheldon requested that the Secretary of State refuse permission to the unnamed American director to remain in Britain to make the film because of its effect on relatives of the victims and on the general locality because '[a] film should not be made for commercial gain when it is part of the recent past' (Hansard 1968). In the article, author Williams – now screenwriter and co-producer of the film adaptation of *Beyond Belief* – responded to Sheldon's ethical problems with cinema as a commercial medium by stressing its aesthetic advantages for permitting a sensitive treatment of the subject. He explained, 'film is an elastic medium in which one can suggest the horror without detailing it'.⁵ Sheldon's opposition provoked a number of letters to *The Times* supporting his campaign against the film, including from Hansford Johnson who distanced her book from Friedkin's 'hideous and

indecent proposal’ and demanded greater film censorship as a necessary antidote to the ‘permissive society’ (Hansford Johnson 1966).

The conjoined media and political backlashes and threats of legal action from the families of the victims and even, it is claimed, Hindley and Brady, were understood to have pushed Palomar Pictures into backing out due to – as Friedkin described it – ‘the obvious difficulties, both legal and moral in presenting such a film.’⁶ Ray Brooks, the actor asked to play Brady in the film, claimed that Palomar dropped out from fear that Brady and Hindley could bring a defamation of character claim in U.S. courts, as De Salvo had attempted to do against Twentieth Century Fox (Brooks 2014). However, Friedkin and Williams were still working on a second draft script in April 1969 – well after the initial controversy and Palomar’s withdrawal – as their correspondence shows: ‘It’s a very important film, and all the problems connected with making it, of which I’m sure there are many more to come, are more than worth it as far as I’m concerned’ (Friedkin 1969).⁷ Yet, it appears that it was censorship rather than legal issues that put an end to the project. Whilst there is no correspondence regarding this film project that had the working title *Beyond Belief* in the BBFC archives, Trevelyan spoke in his memoir about his blanket refusal to consider accepting this film, juxtaposing the BBFC’s shift in thinking on a Christie film in the late 1960s (discussed below) to being ‘firmly opposed to the making of a film based on the “Moors murder” case’ which was in preproduction concurrently (1973: 161). It could be argued that the controversy surrounding Friedkin’s ‘Moors murders’ film produced a favourable climate in which a film based on the *10 Rillington Place* case and book appeared more acceptable through its relative historical distance and lesser emotional resonance for politicians, the press and the public.

The BBFC and the Christie Murders

This section offers a diachronic examination of a series of failed attempts by filmmakers across the 1960s, to get the BBFC to consider certification of a film about recent British serial killer John Christie. It seeks to situate this ongoing contention in relation to contemporary media, political and societal concerns, particularly the shifting debates and consensus on capital punishment provoked, in part, by the ongoing resonance of the Christie case.⁸

John Reginald Christie, known to his family as Reg Christie, murdered at least eight people, including his wife Ethel, by strangling them in his flat at 10 Rillington Place, Notting Hill, London in the 1940s and 1950s. Two of Christie's victims were Beryl Evans and her baby daughter Geraldine who, along with Beryl's husband, Timothy Evans, were tenants at 10 Rillington Place from 1948-49. This case sparked huge controversy after Evans was charged with both murders, found guilty of the murder of his daughter, and hanged in 1950. After Christie moved out of Rillington Place in 1953, bodies of three of his other victims were discovered hidden in a wallpaper-covered alcove in the kitchen. Two further bodies were discovered in the garden, and his wife's body was found beneath the floorboards of the front room. Christie was arrested and convicted of his wife's murder, the crime for which he was hanged on 15 July 1953 after an insanity plea was rejected. Whilst awaiting trial he confessed to the murders of the other victims discovered on his property, including Evans's wife but not the child Geraldine.

It is now generally accepted that Christie murdered both of them, however, and that the police mishandling of the original investigation allowed Christie to escape detection and enabled him to murder four more women. Evans was posthumously pardoned for the murder of his daughter on 18 October 1966, following a decade of family, political and media pressure (including from Kennedy's best-selling book) and the growing public acceptance of his innocence contributed to the 1965 suspension, and subsequent abolition, of capital punishment in Britain. Therefore, the miscarriage of justice represented by the Evans investigation and trial

kept the Christie murders prominent within public culture through the mid-1950s to mid-1960s, until the emerging horrors of the Moors murders were revealed across rolling newspaper headlines and television news reports.

The first correspondence with the BBFC relating to a Christie film was instigated in early 1962 by Irish screenwriter, producer and director Kevin McClory, known most popularly as producer of the James Bond film *Thunderball* (Terence Young, 1965). Anticipating the BBFC's response, McClory stated that he 'fully appreciate[d] the controversial nature of the subject matter', but intended to present it in a 'factual and dignified manner', as a 'serious study of a tragic sequence of events unparalleled in the history of criminology' (McClory 1962). Trevelyan consulted with BBFC president Lord Morrison (1960-65) before confirming what he had expressed in his initial phone conversation with McClory, that there was 'no possibility of the project being accepted' (Trevelyan 1962).

The next approach to the BBFC came only a year later from American producer John Clein, who had most recently produced (and passed through the BBFC) British crime film *Dr Crippen* (Robert Lynn, 1963), a revisionist account of notorious British murder case from 1910 starring Donald Pleasence in the eponymous role. Dr Hawley Harvey Crippen was convicted and hung for the murder of his wife in 1910, but the film, a combination of courtroom drama and melodrama, portrayed his wife as abusive and questioned his guilt. The film received an X rating as it met the BBFC's criteria for fifty years distance from the depicted crime. Clein sought to convince the BBFC that his approach to the material would be aesthetically and ethically sensitive, presenting Evans and Christie's trails and the 'events leading there to' as 'semi-documentary fiction', and stressing psychiatric causal factors. Clein explained: 'I do not believe it was a pre-meditated crime. It was an Act of God. Christie was a sick man and it was proved on all sides that Evans possessed the mentality of a 10-year-old child. Whichever side made the mistake, it cannot be blamed on anyone' (Clein 1963).

Clein also stressed his track-record in producing true crime material (and the precedent of BBFC passing it) with *Dr Crippen* and *Passport to Shame* (Alvin Rakoff, 1958). Trevelyan remained unmoved, restating that the proposed film was ‘contrary to our existing policy’ (the fifty-year rule) and following a subsequent face-to-face meeting with the ‘most persistent Clein’, that the BBFC president ‘saw no reason to alter the policy in this case’ (Trevelyan 1963).

Clein’s persistent pestering provoked screenwriter Leigh Vance (who wrote *Dr Crippen*) to contact Trevelyan to distance himself from the controversial project about ‘that revolting little pervert’, and to stress that Clein’s angle was actually to demonstrate that Christie was ‘the product of the National Health Act’ which clashed with his only interest in being motivated by an anti-capital punishment agenda (Vance 1963). Therefore, according to Vance, Clein’s approach appears to correspond with that of *Dr Crippen* in calling into question Christie’s culpability whilst implicating government mental health policy, a post-war shift from a legal to medical model of psychiatric provision that culminated in the 1959 Mental Health Act and a gradual shift to deinstitutionalisation. The implication is that Clein felt that Christie and Evans (not yet pardoned for murdering his wife and daughter) should have been legally detained in an ‘asylum’ before their crimes were committed.

The subsequent attempt to revisit the Christie and Evans case came following the Murder (Abolition of Death Penalty) Act 1965 and the 1966 pardoning of Evans. Mark Fisher of Aquarius Films contacted Trevelyan on behalf of himself and his creative partner Laurence, the son of director Roy Boulting. They stated that they were developing a documentary film about the Christie case that they said would not include ‘dramatisations, and therefore impersonations, but having visual material that was factual with overlaid voices. They would not be directly concerned with the murders themselves, but with the psychological and social

causes of Christie in particular' (Trevelyan 1966).⁹ Although Trevelyan reiterated the BBFC's 'policy which did not permit the recreation onscreen of any actual murder case' until the elapse of fifty years, this new approach prompted him to consult the BBFC president, Lord Morrison, on both this project and the wider policy. This policy had, until recently, been shared by theatre and television, and Trevelyan explained to Morrison that his correspondence with Fisher had prompted him to revisit correspondence from 1960 between himself, the Lord Chamberlain (whose Office was responsible for theatre censorship), the Independent Television Authority (ITA), and Sir Charles Cunningham of the Home Office – who had 'strongly advocated the maintenance of this policy' (Trevelyan 1966). This corresponds with Sian Barber's claims of the BBFC and ITA's 'united approach to the issue of censorship', publicly and privately, 'ensuring parity between television and film censorship' (2011: 21; 19). Explaining his reasoning to Fisher, Trevelyan continued:

I added that, as regards television, it appeared that the position might have altered since the BBC had recently devoted a whole issue of *Panorama* to the Hanratty case. I added that on this point of policy I would have to consult the President, and that he might think it desirable that we should find out the present policy of the Television Authority.
(Trevelyan 1966)

The episode of *Panorama* to which Trevelyan was referring was the 7 November broadcast 'Hanratty: Case for Enquiry' that revisited the evidence of the 1961 'A6 murder case' for which James Hanratty was convicted and executed in 1962. Here Trevelyan looked to the BBC for censorship advice which Barber suggests was not usually the case for the BBFC as, quoting a 1967 BBC pamphlet, the public sector broadcaster's libel-focused approach was 'more akin to

similar process in large newspapers that they are to the machinery of censorship in the theatre and film industry' (Barber 2011: 18).

Whilst Fisher and Boulting's documentary never came to fruition, it did set in motion a reconsideration of the fifty-year policy based on this recent precedent on television. The BBC's policy shift for *Panorama*, alongside the recent developments in Hollywood true crime discussed earlier, set up a more favourable climate for discussions with CBS Films in 1968 that would eventually, but not straightforwardly, lead to the film of *10 Rillington Place*. Consultation between CBS and the BBFC started on the wrong foot: Trevelyan made initial contact with CBS to assert their long-held policy, following the studio's trade press announcement in May 1968 that they had bought the rights to Kennedy's acclaimed *10 Rillington Place*. The basis in Kennedy's respected and influential book, and the author's involvement in the project, appears to have contributed to the BBFC's decision to revisit their thinking on films portraying recent murder cases. Trevelyan and new BBFC President Lord Harlech (1965-1985) met with Kennedy and representatives from CBS in June, and were convinced enough of the honest intentions and sensitive approach of the proposed film to reconsider their policy, immediately contacting their legal advisors, consulting once more the ITA and the BBC, and considering seeking advice from the Home Office. The BBFC's legal advisor, Lord Goodman, was well versed in these converging censorship and legal concerns regarding representing living and recently dead people on stage and screen, having been a member of the Joint Select Committee on Censorship of the Theatre, established in July 1966, whose 1967 report fed into the abolition of State censorship of theatre with the 1968 Theatres Act. One of Goodman's key roles and (failed) interventions within the Joint Committee's deliberations had been in regard to 'fact-based theatre', including his initial proposal of a 'draconian' amendment based upon an untenable distinction between individual's private and public lives (Megson 2011: 141).

Trevelyan's letter to Goodman expresses his and Lord Harlech's conviction that the proposed film focusing on the miscarriage of justice in the Evans case would not 'comment adversely on anyone involved in the case; nor is it their intention to put onscreen details of the revolting murders' (Trevelyan 1968a). He reminded Goodman of the extant fifty-year policy but expressed that some ambiguity and flexibility had crept in in the 1960s, 'when occasion arose, to the extent of reducing the time lapse to say 30 years.' Trevelyan also cited the recent BBC *Panorama* episode to highlight precedent for greater flexibility in the application of this rule in other media, despite the Home Office's commitment to maintain this rule across mediums. He asked Goodman, therefore, '[...] whether such a policy on these lines could not be maintained but that each proposed film should be considered individually in the light of whether there were, or were not, circumstances which made its screening undesirable' (Trevelyan 1968a). At this stage, therefore, Trevelyan was seeking to instil some flexibility when 'serious' films such as this were proposed, whilst seeming to maintain a general principle that maintained the status quo. He continued: 'It would clearly be wise to convey our approval in terms which did not establish this as a general precedent which could be used if we had for instance a proposal to make a film of the "Moors" murder case, a film which obviously presents different problems and ones which were likely to cause us much greater concern'. The unrepresentability of the Moors murders was not seen as justification for maintaining a blanket prohibition on recent murder cases, but rather as strong dialectical argument for why the Evans-Christie case might actually be acceptable in censorship terms.

Goodman felt this 'rigid rule' was no longer appropriate and that 'each case should be considered individually having regard to the considerations which brought that rule into existence.' (Goodman 1968). Like Trevelyan, Goodman was 'less impressed by arguments that it is wrong to show actual murder cases on film because these may be sensational and sordid', given what was being accepted in regard to scenes of fictional violence, than with legal issues

relating to the portrayal of living persons and with issues of libel specifically (Goodman 1968). About *10 Rillington Place* he was concerned that ‘Kennedy in his book has strong criticisms of the conduct of the prosecution and of two police officers [...] it will be difficult to avoid touching on these points.’ His was a measured argument:

I am not suggesting that the BBFC should provide an alternate remedy to the law of libel. It would be quite wrong to use censorship which prevents freedom of comment or freedom of criticism, but you are, I think, entitled to use it to prevent offensive reference to living people which are not based on mature and careful consideration of the circumstances, but solely design to exploit the situation for someone’s commercial benefit.

He advised, therefore, that both for this film and for a general policy moving forward, there should be ‘no absolute rule but that each case had to be decided on its merit’ based on seeing and approving the script, and that the ‘manner of representation of any living person depicted in the film would have to be unobjectionable’ (Goodman 1968).

There was no need for the BBFC to contact the Home Office as there was ‘no likelihood of any future reopening of the case’ (Goodman 1968) and therefore no question of the filmmakers being in contempt of court, and the BBFC having a responsibility to protect them. Despite this final advice, Trevelyan contacted the Home Office to *inform* them (rather than *consult* them) that they had ‘approved in principle’ a project based on *10 Rillington Place*. Francis Graham-Harrison, Deputy Under Secretary of State, replied that the Home Office were unhappy that the film had been ‘excepted from the previously agreed [50 years] policy’ given the ‘case involved the killing of two people less than twenty years ago’, and felt it might create a ‘potentially embarrassing precedent’ for the BBFC (Graham-Harrison 1968). Trevelyan

responded diplomatically that he appreciated Graham-Harrison's 'apprehension' and would keep his points in mind at script approval stage (Trevelyan 1968).

However, when CBS submitted their draft script nine months later, in May 1969, Trevelyan was 'very disappointed' to see that it 'appeared to consist largely of cheap sensationalism' rather than being 'a serious study of a serious subject' as promised (Trevelyan 1969a). He stated that this 'deplorable' screenplay had no chance of acceptance by the BBFC as it focused far too heavily on Christie's 'horrible murders' and the 'sexual motivations of the crimes', rather than Evans and the miscarriage of justice, and was rife with factual errors and omissions (including the death of the child Geraldine): 'I find it difficult to believe that Ludovic Kennedy who wrote a serious book on this subject, would be happy about this screenplay, and I shall be glad if you will let me know whether or not it has met with his approval?' (Trevelyan 1969a).

CBS immediately dropped the project. Scriptwriter Sean Graham, seeking to save face, contacted Trevelyan to say that there had been a 'monumental failure of communication' between himself, CBS and producer Stan Shpetner, and that if he 'had been made aware of the kind of picture you envisaged and CBS agreed', he would not 'have wasted his time' on this screenplay that CBS and Shpetner had instructed him to write. Graham felt that a 'good and honest film' could still be made, and agreed with Trevelyan that 'a reputable British producer and director should take on this film' (Graham 1969a). Trevelyan responded to Graham that the BBFC's position had been 'considerably misrepresented to you and Ludovic Kennedy', and felt that the BBFC 'have been used as an excuse to get rid of this project' (Trevelyan 1969b). Kennedy also felt misled by CBS as he was not shown the first draft screenplay; he was relieved that CBS had now withdrawn and hoped to 'reawaken interest in the subject in the film industry in this country' (Kennedy 1969). The collective feeling, therefore, was that

that Hollywood had not and, potentially was not, able to bring the sensitivity and seriousness required to produce an ethical film based on this subject.

The BBFC and *10 Rillington Place*

This section discusses the realisation of the *10 Rillington Place* project within the contexts of the shifting societal, censorship and critical concerns of the late 1960 and early 1970s. In particular, it highlights how a principle of ‘intention’ was marshalled by Trevelyan, and the filmmakers, as the key mechanism to give the Board authority, and autonomy from the blanket Home Office rule, in making decisions on true crime films. However, Trevelyan’s decisions on the legitimacy of filmmaker’s intentions continued to be ‘bound up with notions of quality and taste which were determined by his own personal preferences and predilections’ (Barber 2011: 45).

Following CBS’s withdrawal from the project, the BBFC helped Graham to relaunch *10 Rillington Place* with ‘reputable’ British producer Leslie Linder (who had recently produced Tony Richardson’s *Hamlet* [1969]) on-board. Whilst unable to attach the ‘very good British director’ they were both looking for, experienced Hollywood director Richard Fleischer, who had directed *Compulsion* and *The Boston Strangler* (both passed as acceptable by the BBFC with A and X ratings respectively) appeared suitable to the BBFC. Graham, initially at least, persuaded the BBFC that this new creative team was professionally and personally aligned with the ethical and aesthetic approach they required (Graham 1969b). Trevelyan met a couple more times with Graham over the subsequent months, during which it was agreed that ‘between the two Dicks [Richard Fleischer and Richard Attenborough], yourself, Leslie Linder and myself we can bring out a screenplay that has some stature’ (Graham 1970a). Graham thanked Trevelyan for his ‘assurance of cooperation’ (Graham 1970a) that he said would help seal the financial backing they needed. Trevelyan, therefore, appears to have gone beyond his usual

role in brokering with Graham a film of the ‘stature, which we have both always wanted’ (Trevelyan 1970a).

However, within a month, Graham had withdrawn from the project. He complained to Trevelyan that Fleischer was flouting his ‘very sensitive’ approach to the screenplay and seeking to ‘make “the horror film to end all horror films” [...] He wants to go for it. There is no censorship any more in America’ (Graham 1970b). He conceded: ‘I am a very small writer fighting two very powerful American corporations: they can be vindictive’. Graham included a letter from Fleischer to Martin Ransohoff, from the production company Filmways, that set out a plan to switch the narrative focus from Evans to Christie, ‘so that it is in fact his story’ and the climax is ‘the revelation of Christie to the police as being a mass murderer’. Fleischer continued, ‘By changing the balance and making Christie the story I think it would then be possible to put much more violence and horror into the screenplay’ (Fleischer quoted in Graham 1970b).

This prompted Trevelyan to make a point to Filmways that ‘[t]he fact that the board is prepared to consider this proposal at all is an important change of policy’. He explained the ten-year contestation over the project and the Board’s gradual shift from a blanket prohibition on any cases less than fifty-years old to the recent decision to consider each project individually. He asserted that this meant ‘a film which was created matters for the purpose of public entertainment would be discouraged, while a film that dealt with a murder case in order to make a valid special point might be considered acceptable’. In addition to issues of intention, Trevelyan explained that his decision would be based upon different factors: the feelings of surviving relatives; the ‘possibility that a film of this kind might be regarded as a contempt of court, and involve film distributors and exhibitors (and possibly the producers) in court proceedings’; and possible public reactions – this was both in regards to the public’s opinions of the film industry, and in terms of ‘stimulative and dangerous effects on others with these

kinds of mental disturbances who might see the film.’ As the screenplay submitted by CBS in 1969 was not deemed acceptable on these terms, and the studio had betrayed the agreement to make a film that focused on Evans rather than Christie (i.e. the legal and capital punishment issues rather than the ‘gruesome murders’), he emphasized the importance ‘to put the Board’s conditions clearly in writing at this stage so that there can be no doubt about them, and no possibility of subsequent dispute’. This letter, dated 12 March 1970, is crucial as it sets out a set of principles emerging from Trevelyan’s extended legal and industry consultations that, as Secretary of the BBFC, he felt comfortable putting in writing as a working set of guidelines for films based upon recent British murder cases.

Following Graham’s departure, Trevelyan struck up a professional dialogue with Ludovic Kennedy who was subsequently brought on as a script consultant by Filmways. In a letter from Kennedy thanking Trevelyan, the author put his new project role down to the BBFC Chairman’s influence on the producers (Kennedy 1970). In Kennedy, Trevelyan still had a respected ‘friend’ on the project with a similar vision for it and, arguably, aligned ‘notions of quality and taste’ (Barber 2011: 45). Correspondence between the two men suggests that as a result of the alarm raised by Graham, Trevelyan and Kennedy decided to ‘meet in private to discuss’ a ‘few concerns’ the BBFC had regarding the project. However, Trevelyan’s reading of the second draft script (which Clive Exton wrote and on which Kennedy acted as consultant) raised only two issues – excessive violence in one scene; and a point-of-view shot when a body is discovered in the wall – that needed to be changed to be acceptable to the Board. In fact, the final narrative of the film is much as described in Fleischer’s letter that was forwarded by Graham to Trevelyan to raise the alarm at the script changes he proposed. These changes included: a new chronological structure around ‘Christie’s story’ and climax in his arrest rather than focusing on Evans and using selective flashbacks and forwards to fill the historical gaps; starting the film with one of Christie’s early murders in 1944 and the hiding of the body in the

garden, where another body is accidentally exhumed in the process; the ‘important’ inclusion of the murder of the Evans daughter Geraldine (which Trevelyan had actually pushed to be added to Graham’s earlier draft as it was central to the case); and the addition of Christie murdering his wife Ethel following Evans’ trial and execution. These changes clearly switched the narrative far more to focus on Christie’s story, rather than the miscarriage of justice with Evans, and as a result the script included far more murders, sexual violence and visual representation of victims’ bodies, key censorship issues flagged up as unacceptable in relation to the earlier CBS script.

Aligning with Trevelyan’s converging criteria for acceptability regarding the purpose for making the film and the quality and tastefulness of the finished product, critical reception of *10 Rillington Place* also focused on these intersecting ethical and aesthetic concerns. In interviews with Fleischer, the director insisted that his decision to adapt Kennedy’s ‘anti-capital punishment document’ (Hall 1970) was motivated by his personal moral convictions regarding the death sentence. The film was positioned as an explicit intervention into the capital punishment debate, but not solely because an innocent man was executed instead of a guilty one. Fleischer argued that *10 Rillington Place* was about ‘two sick people [...] For fate to put these two people together, at the right time, in the right place, a tragedy had to happen. And it did. To both of them.’ Fleischer hoped the audience would feel degrees of compassion for both men: disabled war veteran ‘Christie was a monster [...but] I hope there will be some understanding, and some compassion for him’ (Hall 1970).

In an October 1970 interview with Michael Billington for *The Times*, the director highlighted the two ethical and aesthetic questions he raised on *The Boston Strangler* and *10 Rillington Place*, showing that his moral convictions had also shaped his aesthetic choices: at what point in history to make the films, and what degree of violence to show? The former question was answered by motivation – does this question need to be asked now? – and the

second question was one of balance – ‘show too much and you run the risk of gratuitous sensationalism; show too little and you falsify the nature of the murderer. After all, it’s easy to feel compassion for Christie or the Boston Strangler if you never see what they actually did.’ Fleischer noted concerns relating to surviving relatives’ feelings but stressed the political significance of the film in intervening in the capital punishment debate, in Britain and America, as justification for making the film now. Reproducing Trevelyan’s distinction between treating true crime cases as entertainment or as evidence to make a ‘valid special point’ (Trevelyan 1970), critic Billington concluded that ‘Fleischer the crusading campaigner is increasingly taking over from Fleischer the ever-reliable Hollywood professional’ (Billington 1970).

Press coverage of the film’s production also spoke to Trevelyan’s concerns regarding taste and quality, particularly through reference to the highly respected veteran actor Richard Attenborough’s casting, and the uncanny authenticity of his performance. A *Daily Mail* news article on the film foregrounded Fleischer’s restaging of the *mise-en-scène* on location on the original street (though not house) where the crimes were committed, and juxtaposed photographs of Christie and Attenborough in costume and on location. The article drew its headline from a former neighbour exclamation that, ‘It’s as if he’d come back from the grave.’ Like Fleischer, Attenborough stressed his moral motivations for making the film, explaining ‘this part is so disturbing that I don’t really like doing it’ (Attenborough quoted in Cable 1970). These press reports praised the location filming and claustrophobic staging within the decaying Rillington Place home as a mark of quality rather than tastelessness (see figure 2). – Only in the last five minutes do we see Christie outside these drab, deteriorating locations, when he is juxtaposed to a more colourful and multicultural vision of 1950s London.

10 Rillington Place was released with an X rating on 29 January 1971 to somewhat conflicted reviews. Perhaps surprisingly, a key issue raised by the broadsheet reviewers in particular was that the film wasn’t sensational enough. In his *Sunday Observer* review, Derek

Malcolm complained that in its attempt to ‘warily tread the old path between fact and fiction’, the film was cautious ‘to the point of being careworn in the pursuit of the middle path.’ The middle(brow) path that Malcolm was critiquing here, is the ethical and aesthetic compromise which I’ve referred to elsewhere as ‘Gothic realism’ (Snelson 2018, 59) or, as Malcolm characterised this dialectic in his review, ‘Grand Guignol kitchen sink’ (Malcolm 1971). Fleischer’s ‘methodical reconstruction of one of the most macabre murder cases of the century’ (Malcolm 1971) fell short of being either sensational entertainment or serious analysis. Similarly, John Russell Taylor of *The Times* commended Fleischer’s ‘thoroughly decent’ approach, but lamented that in being so cautious to ‘meticulously suppress’ any of the ‘dark and joyless comedy buried beneath’ the case, the director had failed to produce ‘the far more complex, and in the last analysis, quite a bit more serious’ film it should have been (Russell Taylor 1971). Rather than the critics questioning the BBFC’s passing of this true crime film, as with *The Boston Strangler*, they complained that it was ineffective precisely because it had strived too hard to appear serious and tasteful in order to see off anticipated objections from censors, critics and the press.

A month later in an article titled with the pull-quote, ‘The film Christie actually makes the audience laugh ... he comes over as a monster of North Country comedy’, *Guardian* critic Keith Dewhurst contrasted the ‘artistry’ of recent American true crime films to the failings of *10 Rillington Place*. Using the cross-country rampage in *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967) as the key exemplar, he suggested that ‘American murders are easy to dramatize’ because they are all about the act of killing, whereas British murders are not cinematic as they ‘are all about what to do with the body’. The lingering detail of Christie’s murders and disposal of the bodies ‘are too horrible and disgusting for a realistic medium like the movies [...so] you can only make the film at all by being very tasteful’ (Dewhurst 1971). For Dewhurst, therefore, the issue is not so much one of differing legal or censorship contexts, but the nationally-specific nature

of the murders represented onscreen, that forced filmmakers, audiences and censors – for better or for worse – to linger on the sheer horror and morbidity of the crimes.

Conclusion

The BBFC's gradual shift in policy on factual murder cases across the period of Trevelyan's tenure broadly attest to the claim of his liberalising influence on British censorship (Hargreaves 2012: 54). Conversely, however, it also highlights an ongoing nervousness within the BBFC around cinema's role in mediating and commenting on real British criminal cases. The protracted production history of the unmade Christie films and *10 Rillington Place* must be understood in the context of the political and societal concerns and contentions relating to the death penalty and its abolition, and the shock of the revelation of the Moors murders. The embroilment of these censorship decisions in these post-war watershed moments clearly put additional pressure on Trevelyan and the BBFC to proceed cautiously. The BBFC's nervousness was not triggered by fears about inspiring copycat crimes; they were motivated by concerns about damaging the public perception of the film industry (particularly through bad publicity over distress caused to victims' families) and protecting filmmakers from expensive and contentious libel cases or contempt of court charges. The film of *10 Rillington Place* that eventually emerged in the early 1970s, following ten years of BBFC contention and intervention, was deemed out-of-sync with critical tastes and with what audiences were experiencing in Hollywood films and on British television. By the time of its release, Stephen Murphy (1970-1975) had taken over from Trevelyan and was immediately called upon to make bold decisions on a series of highly controversial crime and horror films, including *Straw Dogs* (Sam Peckinpah, 1971), *The Devils* (Ken Russell, 1971) and *A Clockwork Orange*. His decisions to pass these films triggered media panics about their potential to 'inflamm[e] people to violence' (*The Sun* 1972), and provoked the *Sunday Mirror* to

question, ‘How much more violence, sadism and rape is [...] Stephen Murphy going to let movie-makers get away with?’ (Simkin 2012: 75). Within just a few months, therefore, the pallid *10 Rillington Place* already appeared a vestige of a Gothic tradition in British cinema subsumed beneath the lurid spectacle of this ‘ultra-violence’.

Notes

¹ This and all further references to the *10 Rillington Place* files are to the manuscripts held at the BBFC Archive, London.

² Jack the Ripper probably made his first screen appearance in the British-Gaumont short *Farmer Spud and His Missus Take a Trip to Town* (J.L.V. Leigh, 1915), in which a waxwork Ripper comes to life and chases the farmer and his wife.

³ Hitchcock’s 1948 film *Rope* was also loosely inspired by Leopold and Loeb, but was not explicitly based on the case’s details in the way *Compulsion* was.

⁴ Following a long downward trend in the national murder rate, it doubled for the period 1964-74 and the character of these murders shifted significantly towards stranger killing (victims murdered by people they do not know). This resulted in a sizeable increase in unsolved homicides. The period also saw significant and corollary changes in the judicial and psychological characterisation and treatment of suspects, defendants and criminals (Lane 1997: 268-269).

⁵ Williams had previous screenwriting experience with the subject with his 1935 serial killer play *Night Must Fall* had been adapted by Hollywood in 1937 and more recently in 1964.

⁶ Myra Hindley’s biographer Carol Ann Lee claims it was pressure from the victims’ families, and even Hindley, that ultimately derailed the film. On receiving a draft contract for the film, Hindley certainly sent a letter instructing her solicitor to try to block the production due to the ‘harrowing’ effect it would have on her and Brady’s family (2011: 289).

⁷ Friedkin planned to return to continue working on the film in April 1969, joking: ‘I am now able, Parliament willing, to re-enter Great Britain, so that we can meet there as soon as necessary’. Friedkin to Williams, 5 April 1969, Emlyn Williams Papers (L3/5).

⁸ An important precursor (rather than precedent) to these Christie projects is the mid 1950s film *Yield to the Night* (J. Lee Thompson, 1956), given an X rating by the BBFC. The film is often incorrectly characterised as a fictionalised version of the story of Ruth Ellis, the last woman in Britain to be hanged. The similarities with this case are coincidental as the script was written two years earlier, but the film – and its publicity poster that provoked audiences ‘Would you hang Mary Hilton?’ – were marshalled to tap into the public debate on the death penalty (Williams 2002: 8).

⁹ A note by ‘the Secretary’ dated 29 November states that when Fisher visited he stated that their project was ‘based on a book by Mr [Michael] Eddowes who came to see you about 10 years ago’. This was the first book written on the case, *The Man on your Conscience: An investigation of the Evans murder trial* (1955), which

controversially at the time made a case for Evans innocence. The note suggests that Eddowes might have been considering adapting his book for the screen in the mid-1950s following its publication.

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