Correspondence: Professor Robert Shail, Director of Research, School of Film, Music and Performing Arts, Leeds Beckett University, Electric Press, 1 Millennium Square, Leeds LS2 3AD. Email: r.shail@leedsbeckett.ac.uk

Abstract

For over thirty years the Children's Film Foundation (CFF) produced a variety of shorts, travelogues, serials and features which were shown at a network of Saturday morning cinema clubs all over the UK and beyond. At their peak in the 1960s and 1970s they reached an audience in excess of half a million per week. Throughout that period their work caused barely a ripple of reaction at the offices of the British Board of Film Censors, latterly the British Board of Film Classification. That is until the submission of *Terry on the Fence* (1986), the very last feature to be completed by the CFF (by then renamed as the Children's Film and Television Foundation or CFTF). The film produced a reaction unique in the Foundation's history requiring alteration to its content. This article makes extensive use of the archives of the BBFC to show how *Terry on the Fence* touched a raw nerve in terms of its depiction of juvenile delinquency and exposed some of the same social anxieties that had fed into the so-called video nasties case. It doing so it reflects the degree to which censorship can be seen to respond to prevailing contextual factors.

Censorship in Context: the BBFC, the CFF and *Terry on the Fence*

Robert Shail

The relationship between children and cinema, especially pertaining to the possible ill effects of the medium on a young audience, has been a perennial cause for public debate since the earliest days of film-going. Terry Staples, in his study of children's cinema in Britain, shows how an initial concern for the public safety of children in cinema premises (brought about by a series of appalling tragedies) quickly developed into a debate over the potential moral harm caused by the viewing of inappropriate material.[1] Frequently fuelled by the campaigning of various pressure groups, often religious in origin, this debate has rarely been far from newspaper headlines to the current day. Julian Petley has shown how tabloid coverage of the topic has distorted public discourse, so that with the murder of James Bulger in 1993 links were repeatedly made by the British press between the case and the film *Child's Play 3* despite the lack of any evidence directly connecting them[2]. This led in turn to a tightening of censorship through amendments to the Video Recordings Act. This essay seeks to investigate

this issue through examination of an historical case study; that of the children's film *Terry on the Fence* (1986). Although in no way comparable to the sensational controversy surrounding *Child's Play 3*, this example illustrates the way in which debates regarding the influence of films on the behaviour of children have been of concern for film-makers, audiences, and bodies such as the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC). The specifics of the case also shed light on the operation of the BBFC at a time when they were under considerable pressure, indicating the degree to which censorship is often the product of contextual forces.

At the heart of this story are two organisations for whom children as an audience are central. Firstly, there is the producer of the film, the Children's Film and Television Foundation (CFTF). The origins of the Foundation lay in the children's Saturday film clubs which had appeared almost from the beginning of commercial cinema in Britain; the earliest has been recorded as 1900.[3] The clubs aroused a great deal of criticism in their early years for the selection of material seemingly chosen with little regard to its suitability for young audiences. This provided the impetus for J. Arthur Rank to begin producing films specifically for children to be shown via his own network of clubs from 1944 onwards. The financial burden Rank felt in producing these films was lifted in 1951 with the creation of the Children's Film Foundation (CFF). With modest funding through an annual grant from the Eady Levy (a small tax on cinema tickets), and a Board selected from the main industry trade associations, the CFF invited producers to apply for funding to make children's films which would then be supplied to the network of Saturday clubs. The work produced ranged across cliff-hanger serials, comedy shorts, travelogues and educational documentaries but their flagship was the production of sixty-minute fiction feature films made for an audience of children and which usually formed the second half of the Saturday clubs' programmes. At its height in the 1960s and early 1970s the children's clubs run by Rank, the ABC chain and a number of independents ran to roughly 800 venues with attendances at more than 400,000 per week.[4]

A moral agenda had always been part of the ethos envisaged by both Rank and the CFF's first head, Mary Field. The Foundation also undertook regular surveys to gauge what its young audiences enjoyed and arrived at a formula which emphasised clear storylines, audience identification (with children taking the lead roles), action over dialogue, and humour over romance. Stories would have a moral but never preach; entertainment would keep the children in their seats and the message could follow.[5] These surveys often revealed a good deal about the historical moment in which they were undertaken and tended to reflect the Foundation's own preconceived expectations of their audience. For example, a gender

divide was apparently evident with boys preferring war subjects and westerns (genres outside the Foundation's remit), while girls preferred adventure stories. These findings were taken to validate the gender bias which the Foundation took as self-evident. The children's favourite character type was the villain, which prompted the report's anonymous author to remind us that this didn't mean that the villain should go unpunished. Henry Geddes, who had taken over as CEO in the same year, made the Foundation's approach clear in his statement introducing the survey:

> All children share the same basic likes and dislikes in film entertainment. They are passionately fond of all domestic animals and are visibly upset by any form of animal cruelty. They prefer the maximum amount of screen action and have little patience with unnecessary dialogue or any suggestion of adult romance. They have a strong instinct for fair play and a pronounced sympathy with the underdog.

The films should encourage children to be 'fair, tolerant and responsible' and to 'become responsible adults.' This view was reiterated in another report published by the Foundation in 1967 called *Saturday Morning Cinema*. It opened with a robust defence of the Foundation by Chairman John Davis entitled 'Films to be Proud Of' which reminded the CFF's film-makers of 'the important opportunity, in fact responsibility, which he has to influence the young minds in a desirable way … they must do so without frightening or unbalancing delicate sensitivities; the good and the bad must be obvious but sermons must be avoided.'[6]

As the 1970s progressed, the clubs found themselves in increasing competition from Saturday morning television which, with its cartoons, pop music and competitions, seemed to duplicate what they offered. With declining audiences, the demand for the CFF's work diminished. Deals with the BBC and ITV led to its films appearing on television and to a name change to the Children's Film and Television Foundation, but the final blow came with the removal of its Eady funding in the early 1980s. Despite this, its final years witnessed a move towards more challenging material, as evidenced by *Terry on the Fence*. A major influence on this change of direction was a similar development which had occurred in the BBC's children's television provision where programs like *Grange Hill* (1978-2008) pioneered the tackling of serious contemporary issues in a realist style, and subsequently attracted considerable controversy; both Monica Sims, who headed BBC children's output until 1978, and her successor, Anna Home, who brought *Grange Hill* to the BBC, later took charge at the CFTF. Along with *Terry on the Fence*, this last period of output from the Foundation saw other challenging work. This included *Haunters of the Deep* (1984), a ghost story exposing the conditions of child labour in Victorian mines, and two films from director

John Krish: an adaptation of Michael Morpurgo's World War Two drama *Friend or Foe* (1982) and the self-scripted *Out of the Darkness* (1985), both of which confronted young viewers with complex moral dilemmas and adult themes. As Krish himself put it, 'I feel strongly that it isn't necessary to soften a subject like this for a young audience, they are perfectly capable of responding to it and understanding it'.[7]

Terry on the Fence was directed and co-produced by the veteran filmmaker Frank Godwin for Eyeline Films and adapted by him from the novel by Bernard Ashley, a former head teacher who had established a reputation for his skill at writing gritty contemporary dramas which dealt with ethical and social dilemmas affecting young people. *Terry on the Fence* shows a remarkable progression in the work of the Foundation from its cosy work of the 1950s. It tells the story of Terry (Jack McNicholl) who, following a row at home with his mother, falls in with a gang of delinquent kids led by the aggressive Les (Neville Watson). Les initially intimidates Terry, firstly by showing him the scar he has from an unspecified attack by his own mother, and then by threatening to leave him locked in the dockyard building which the gang use as a hideout. Terry is forced to take part in a burglary at his school but although he subsequently admits his part, he refuses to identify Les. Terry later finds Les and sees at close-hand the treatment he receives at home. The two boys eventually end up in juvenile court but proper justice is done and Terry is acquitted. He is also able to speak up on behalf of Les for whom he feels great sympathy. There is considerable realism in the film including an element of swearing, albeit in mild terms like 'bloody', and there is acknowledgement of racial tensions (in a Britain which was hit by race riots in the 1980s) when a black boy and white boy in the gang exchange insults. Most controversially, Les is in possession of a knife which he uses for breaking in to the school and there is an underlying threat in the first scenes between him and Terry. The film follows the example of other late CFTF films like *Friend or Foe* in presenting its young audience with moral challenges. Les is initially a frightening figure but when we learn about his life we see him differently. This culminates in the sequence when the police catch Terry retrieving a stolen radio. Les is hiding behind a tree and when the officer asks Terry if anyone else is with him and he is literally and figuratively caught on a fence, unsure whether to do the right thing according to the law or to protect his new friend. However, for the BBFC it was not the moral ambiguities that caused difficulties but the risk of depicting the charismatic Les in possession of a knife and using it to make threats.

Like the CFF, the British Board of Film Censors, as they were initially named from their inception in 1912, was formed by the industry itself as a response to public pressure and

in an attempt to remain free from government intervention. A further similarity to the CFF was that their formation was also an unforeseen consequence of the Cinematograph Act (first enacted 1909 and subsequently revised) which had come into existence to licence cinemas so as to improve safety standards but which then had its remit extended to allow regulation on the grounds of morality. Funded directly by industry bodies, the BBFC was often closer to government than it's original intentions, particularly during World War Two, but largely turned its face towards film producers to negotiate content and allocate a certificate to each film. In relation to films aimed at children or family audiences its U category, which deemed a film suitable for all, became the preferred certificate and less appropriate or unsuitable material was awarded the 'A' classification where parents were advised to apply discretion. Under the stewardship of John Trevelyan, Secretary from 1958 to 1971, these categories were refined in response to the increasing complexity and variation of material the Board had to consider during his tenure, as well as due to the growing number of films which contained more overtly adult material than had previously been the case. The X certificate had already been brought in to to classify material deemed strictly for adults and now the original U and A were joined by the AA for over fourteens, enabling the BBFC to further segment the audience by age. By the 1980s, when *Terry on the Fence* was released, these classifications had become the more self-explanatory 15, the PG or Parental Guidance which warned guardians of material they might feel was unsuitable for younger children (rather like the old A category) and the U category, which in the public's mind came to be associated overwhelmingly with films aimed at younger children.[8] This increased sensitivity to differentiation by age within the non-adult audience has increased subsequently with the introduction of a 12 category and even the 12A where parental discretion again comes into play.

For most of its history the output of the CFF was unproblematic in relation to certification in that the U certificate was invariably sought and obtained. As Terry Staples puts it, 'Normally, a film shot specially for the CFF was more or less guaranteed a U because the CFF would see at script stage if there was anything that the censor was likely to object to'.[9] He suggests that there were only very few 'brushes with the BBFC' and details just one, which involved a film produced in the USSR titled *No Holiday for Inochkin* (1964) which inadvertently contained some innocent nudity which the BBFC insisted should be removed; cultural differences might be blamed here. Julian Petley has shown the degree to which production companies and distributors have usually self-censored for younger audiences in order to obtain the required certificate, a practice that continues today.[10] As Trevelyan

argued, 'the classification of films into categories is undertaken for the protection of children'.[11] In his memoirs he repeatedly uses the term 'harm' to describe the underlying intentions behind the Board's approach to censorship of children's films, suggesting a balance to be struck between not overly sheltering children from the harsh realities of the grown-up world, while also protecting them from the potentially harmful effects of seeing unsuitable material too early.[12] He acknowledged the difficulties of knowing what might actually cause 'harm' to children and the lack of evidential research to assist the Board in making these choices. At the same time, the terminology he uses tends to emphasise the damaging impact of scenes which might frighten or disturb children, a proposition still largely accepted by censors. This approach is rooted in a notion of childhood development in which the adult world is gradually negotiated by growing children in an incremental manner, reflected in the age divisions of the Board's categories; their role in classifying rather than censoring was foregrounded by their name change in 1984. Such gradations were largely irrelevant to the CFF for most of their history as their output stayed far away from any grey areas of interpretation. In an issue of the *Journal of the Society of Film and Television Arts* dedicated to the CFF Trevelyan argued that children should be protected from the depiction of violence which indicated genuine suffering or cruelty, and that any depiction of sex would be likely to simply bore them.[13] Tellingly, he also suggests that the other rationale for the protection of children should be to avoid showing scenes 'which might encourage children to do dangerous things', this to include any use of weapons or objects which might be used as weapons. Implicit is the notion that children would be likely to copy actions shown on screen, an idea re-emerges in the BBFC's debates over the censoring of *Terry on the Fence*.

Trevelyan's position adopts various epistemological positions in relation to the nature of children and childhood which are largely assumed to be self-evident. Academics working in the relatively new area of childhood studies have shown that such assumption always operate from within an adult perspective and encompass distinct value judgements rooted in their cultural time and place. For Allison James and Adrian James, 'the idea of childhood must be seen as a particular cultural phrasing of the early part of the life course, historically and politically contingent and subject to change'.[14] Such an historical perspective has subsequently been used to show how prevalent concepts of childhood in Britain draw heavily on discourses which developed during the Victorian period and which have persisted long since. One of these is the notion of childhood innocence, as opposed to lack of experience, which imbues childhood and children with 'a natural goodness and clarity of vision' seen to be under threat and requiring the requisite protection.[15] This model of childhood is curiously

supported by its opposite, that of the 'evil child', one whose lack of formed moral sensibility means they are likely to be influenced by poor or inappropriate role models which compound their irresponsible tendencies. Both concepts are evident in the BBFC's initial approach to *Terry on the Fence.*[16] A brief example of how historically placed such judgements can be is given by the CFF's *Soapbox Derby* (1957). One sequence depicts a fight between two gangs of boys who repeatedly exchange blows culminating in one being thrown into a river. This was deemed unexceptional at the time of its original release when it obtained a U certificate presumably on the basis that such rough and tumble between boys was unremarkable. The recent DVD reissue was given a PG certificate for 'mild violence and threat' (as stated on the DVD case) acknowledging that a contemporary audience might be more concerned by the casual way that the fight is depicted. Similarly, the suspense and gentle shocks of the Foundation's Victorian chiller *The Man from Nowhere* (1976) caused no difficulties at all for the BBFC in the mid-seventies, whereas in 2013 the idea of a young girl being followed and menaced by a sinister older man necessitated a shift to PG.

By the time of the submission of *Terry on the Fence* to the BBFC on 31 October 1985 the Foundation had already begun to produce material which pushed the boundaries of their previous work. *Haunters of the Deep* was passed as U without cuts in October of the previous year with the comment from a BBFC examiner that it was 'enough to scare but not disturb',[17] while during the same month *Break Out*, with its depiction of the friendship between its juvenile heroes and an escaped convict, provoked reservations from another examiner: 'I'm uneasy about the way that the boys are meant to sympathise with Donny but remembering *Great Expectations* I feel that there are precedents.'[18] *Terry on the Fence* was to cause a good deal more anxiety. It was viewed on 7 November and assessed as 'borderline PG for treatment, language and as a whole' by one examiner who also found it to be 'a nice little film which tries to make kids see that all is not black and white', conceding that it was 'very moral and cannot be accused of encouraging kids into the antisocial activities portrayed.'[19] At the same time the examiner felt that 'there are problems, notably the idea of a mother mutilating her own son.' There were concerns over the language used but it was the notion of Les having been scarred by his mother that disturbed the examiner most: 'There are three bloodies, one bleeding, one damned and one dammit … which makes it seem strong for "U" but it is really the idea of the scar that worries and "PG" seemed the safe decision.'

A second report by another examiner was less equivocal marking the film as a definite PG for 'treatment, horror, language and legality, and as a whole.' The examiner's report objected to the use of 'I'm bloody not' and two uses of 'get stuffed'. However, it was Les's

scar that caused the real problem again: 'I think it's a horrid little scene when Les scratches his scar till it bleeds and for kiddies would be disturbing.' The third examiner also recommended PG under a number of headings including the theme and treatment which involved stealing and trouble with the police, the language, the violence – 'threats of violence and being cut up' – and its depiction of 'criminal techniques' such as breaking and entering. The treatment of Les by his mother was referred to again under the heading of violence: 'implied mother cut child across the throat.' In summary, although the third examiner found the film 'thoroughly moral' a PG was warranted for 'introducing the idea, and seeing the consequences of, a mother attacking her son's throat with a knife … strong language for a "U" plus some nasty threatening of the hero by the gang together with the domestic aggression discussed above made me think "PG".' We don't actually see this attack in the film and although Les's mum mistreats him we can't be entirely sure that she has caused the scar on his neck, although the inference is there. An inter-office memo indicates that a fourth examiner identified also looked at the film and was inclined to award a U certificate but this report doesn't exist.[20] The memo is addressed to the Secretary to the BBFC Board on behalf of the examiners and summarises the four reports as scoring 2½ to 1½ in favour of a PG. The memo confirms that the undecided ½ score relates to one examiner who appears to have been open to either classification being used. In retrospect, the decision seems out of step with the general direction being taken by the BBFC, as indicated by a decision at almost the same time to pass John Krish's *Out of the Darkness*, a disturbing drama of mob violence, uncut as a U. The Board's reports on this film show that while the question of a PG certificate came up, the ability of the film to deal seriously with moral issues was seen as being in its favour: 'A work of quality – scary for children, certainly – but dealing with a dark side of the world in a way which neither treats them as idiots, nor presumes on level-headed maturity. One too in which a happy ending resolves doubts about intense adult viciousness. A good case here for non-anodyne version of the "U".'[21] The key difference between the films is that *Out of the Darkness* frames its action within a ghost story and is partially set in the past, whereas *Terry on the Fence* is resolutely reflecting contemporary Britain.

The first reaction from the film's producers to the then unprecedented award of a PG certificate to a film from the Foundation was curiously to rage at the poor physical treatment of the film by the BBFC. Writing to the BBFC on 12 November, Eyeline stated: 'We are appalled at the state of the print that has been returned to us.' They demanded £250 to cover the cost of repair and told the BBFC that they would be unable to screen the film for the

Directors of the Foundation or have it ready for a scheduled press screening at the London Film Festival due to its condition.[22] However, by the end of the month they had time to consider their response to the ruling and on 26 November Eyeline resubmitted requesting that the film be reclassified as a U. They wrote to the BBFC pointing out that it was based on a best selling book for children by Bernard Ashley, that it was used on school reading lists and that it had been serialised by the BBC as a radio broadcast for schools. They had been 'attracted to this subject because, for once, here was a story which did not portray the kids as conventional "goodies and baddies" and forced the readers to make up their own minds about the central moral issue.'[23] The letter went on:

> We naturally wanted to retain all the power and impact of the original story. At the same time, we realised that we could not show specific acts of violence And, in particular, that we would have to eliminate the central situation of the young boy being physically threatened with a flick knife. Furthermore, we endeavoured to keep the bad language to a necessary minimum; and since the film was previously submitted we have made a further reduction, changing the dialogue in the close-up of the thirteen-year old boy from 'we bloody don't believe you' to 'we don't blinkin' believe you'.
> To be honest, we could not overcome every possible objection without destroying the dramatic impact of the film, and, in the matter of the boy scratching the scar and making it bleed, it is this very action which, when referred to in the courtroom sequence, evokes enormous sympathy and pathos, and underlines the whole emotional climax of the film.
> We believe it has a 'non-preachy' moral core which will be of educational value, and feel that it should be seen by the widest cross-section of youngsters. Incidentally, juvenile court officials have commented favourably on its themes and relevance.'

The letter was copied to the Foundation's Director and its Secretary.

Bernard Ashley later recalled that 'the BBFC objected to a scene in which Terry is threatened with a knife; so, bizarrely, this was altered to have Terry threatened with being imprisoned and left to starve!'.[24] In an interview with the British Film Institute for their DVD reissue of the film he further clarified that Frank Godwin made this alteration prior to filming on advice given by the BBFC at script stage: 'On a recce near the Woolwich Free Ferry, Frank had come across an empty building with a cage built into it, probably Customs' Security. How would I feel if a change were made from the threat of a stabbing to the threat of being left to starve in a secret cage? I agreed with the change, if that meant the film would get made.'[25] In the finished sequence where the gang menaces Terry, little is seen of Les's knife.

BBFC examiners viewed the film again on 27 November in light of the appeal. A detailed report was filled in by an examiner who begins by acknowledging that the previous

assessment had placed the film at PG, describing the judgement as 'a classic legs on a chair problem where several factors each one of which is harmless but which taken together generate worry and concern.'[26] Nonetheless, the examiner came to the conclusion that the film should be a U. Dismissing Eyeline's complaints over the damage to the print, which implies that this was seen as a rouse to put the Board onto the back foot, the examiner argues that it ought to be revised to U because: 'cocooned in Soho we are apt to forget that slices of real life in current Britain even if innocent is apt to be strong meat for the NW1 set. None of the scenes mentioned in the reports is so strong as to take it out of "U" viewed in its social context.' The comments are fascinating in revealing a concern with the wider setting and with the possible influence or reaction of an assumed elite. The report goes on to suggest that the menacing of Terry by Les is 'real' but has precedents in children's literature and comments that the 'scab scratching is hardly video nasty fodder', again acknowledging the climate of the time. The swearing by Les is described as sounding 'very natural'. Most strikingly, the examiner seems to position themselves in relation to contemporaneous media debates about child abuse: 'To cavil at allowing this a "U" in a Britain in which the Jasmines and Heidis have dripped into the national consciousness borders on the preposterous … controversial elements pale into insignificance when held up against the recent pattern of juvenile delinquency.' The report goes on to defend the film's politics suggesting that it shows 'the woefully inadequate judicial structures for dealing with working class juvenile crime.'

The reference here to 'Jasmines and Heidis' is revealing in terms of the thinking of the BBFC examiners and their reaction to recent events. The examiner seems to be referring to two serious cases of child neglect and abuse which had made national headlines during the 1980s. In 1984 Heidi Koseda had starved in her own home, while in the same year Jasmine Beckford was beaten to death by her stepfather following a catalogue of abuse which came to light in court; in both instances the children's parents were subsequently jailed. The latter case led to a formal enquiry in 1985 which exposed major failings by social services. The examiner's comments imply that the harsher censorship of the films in the first set of reports might have been the result of over-sensitivity in light of the pubic outcry following these cases. It's less clear as to the link to a 'recent pattern of juvenile delinquency', although this remark may reflect the moral panics headlined in the tabloid press of the 1980s regarding misbehaviour on housing estates during a time of high unemployment. What is clear is the degree to which censorship decisions can be provoked by responses to current events and public anxieties.

A further examiner filed a second, equally detailed report on the same date. The first issue taken up is the use of strong language which is again defended for its realism: 'Bloody is hardly a dreadful word to represent the "fucks" that Les would be far more likely to use … surely the degree of realism necessary to let this film work may extend to the relatively modest amount of naughty language.' The degree to which the examiners' responses can depend on an individual political stance is tellingly revealed by comments which are at odds with the first examiner but which end in the same conclusion. Instead of seeing the film as a timely social statement, the second report suggests the film is 'really a succession of middle class icons and prejudices which are rather simplistically put together to make an easily accessible strong moral take for kids … we have no worries about it being subversive.' The second examiner then deals with the scab picking at length:

> Re fact that the Les character is scarred does, I fear, reflect the brutality of some parents. I don't feel that the idea is essentially harmful: it is after all through this mistreatment that Terry learns to feel sympathy for the boy. I would also point out that this movie hardly introduces the idea of such parental behaviour to young children; the six o'clock news has effectively done that for years. That Les picks at the scar and draws blood is nasty, but I know of few kids, including myself – along time ago I hasten to add – who did not take a delight in scab picking. To say that this is a disturbing image is, in my opinion, to have a view of children akin to them being made of Dresden china. Scab picking a 'PG' image? What next? Nose picking?

These comments are interesting in relation to the notion of 'harm', even if the examiner on this occasion chose to dismiss the idea. The report concludes that U should be the correct category without cuts but still makes their own political judgement explicit, describing the film as needing censorship more because it reinforces 'middle class values in a simplistic and deceitful way. But this is certainly not within my perceived remit of the Board's classification policy.' The film was subsequently returned to Eyeline who trimmed a further six frames from the film – about a quarter of a second – to reduce the scab-picking scene and after a final third viewing it was granted its U certificate and the Foundation's track record was preserved.

The key to understanding the position of the BBFC in this period lies in the context. Film censorship in the UK, perhaps in line with all forms of censorship, has been a political football subject to prevailing pressures, often intensified by the actions of politicians, pressure groups and the press. The 1970s had been a traumatic era for the BBFC with a series of films such as *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), *The Devils* (1972) and *Straw Dogs* (1971) which challenged its examiners. A continuing shift towards a more liberal agenda under

Trevelyan's successor Stephen Murphy aroused public controversy and added momentum to the censorship campaign of Mary Whitehouse and the Festival of Light, leaving the Board besieged. This even impacted on the area of children's cinema, as Sian Barber suggests: 'the relaxation of material for teenage audiences juxtaposed with the increased desire to protect juvenile audiences indicate a contradictory approach to childhood'.[27] The fact that the CFF's audience straddled these age groups had always created challenges in terms of content. By the 1980s the BBFC under James Ferman found itself embroiled in the campaign against the so-called 'video nasties' and under intense scrutiny from newspapers such as the *Daily Mail* who supported a stringent policy on film and video censorship. With the subsequent banning of the 'video nasties' and the introduction of the Video Recordings Act (1984) the BBFC found itself with increased powers relating to the new phenomenon of the home video. The whole notion of 'harm' became central to this remit with the perception that the risk of 'harm' was increased within the domestic sphere, particularly in terms of the possibility of children witnessing material that was unsuitable for them. These changes took place against a backdrop of high youth unemployment, urban decay and inner city riots (1981) in which young people were centrally involved. Increasing concern over the possibility of violent youth unrest affected topics as widely divergent as restrictions on the speed of mopeds to coverage of the punk rock phenomenon. It is against this context that the BBFC's initial reactions to *Terry on the Fence* need to be understood. As Tom Dewe Mathews suggests, class has often been a recurring factor in the anxieties which underpin these shifts in censorship.[28] From the banning of *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) on the grounds that it might incite the working class to revolution, through the cutting of Hammer horror films deemed to appeal to the young working class, and on to the 'video nasties' panic of the Thatcher era and the fears provoked by the Bulger case, the risk of the working class being overtly influenced towards dangerous behaviour by their viewing habits has persisted. In its own way *Terry on the Fence* was an example of this.

The controversy over 'harm' and children's viewing was to continue into the next decade and beyond. In 1993 another campaign was spearheaded by *The Sun* newspaper playing heavily on public reaction to the Bulger case, attempting to find direct links between it and violence on screen. The impact of the Bulger case has been charted by Julian Petley who outlines how a clause added to the Video Recordings Act (1994) instructed the BBFC to have 'special regard' to 'any harm that may be caused to potential viewers or, through their behaviour, to society' particularly in relation to the depiction of criminal behaviour, illegal drugs, violence, horror, and sexual activity.' In terms of this list particular care was to be

taken over any material likely to 'stimulate or encourage' imitation. The 'harm' might be limited in relation to the 'potential' viewer through age restrictions. If a film sets a bad example for small children, for example, the film could be moved to a more suitable category.[29] It's interesting to note that the current BBFC guidelines (2014) refer to the need to 'take into account any detailed portrayal of criminal and violent techniques, and glamorisation of easily accessible weapons, such as knives. Works which portray anti-social behaviour (for example, bullying) uncritically are likely to receive a higher classification.'

In 2014 *Terry on the Fence* was issued for the first time on DVD as part of a three-film set called *Runaways*. The set overall obtained a PG certificate for 'mild language, injury detail, very mild threat and a racial comment' (as per the DVD case), although most of these comments obviously relate to *Terry on the Fence* rather than its two companion films, the innocuous *Johnny on the Run* (1953) and the relatively tame *Hide and Seek* (1972). The film's swearing is now recognised as 'mild' and the notorious picking of the scab has become 'injury detail'. However, the racially motivated trading of insults between a white boy and a black boy in Les's gang which went unnoticed in 1985 has now been picked up. The judgement, nonetheless, has been to push the film back into the PG category, albeit for home viewing which tends to be treated with more caution by the BBFC. I received the following explanation from the BBFC when I enquired about the change in certification: 'While we had classified the film U for theatrical release in 1985, when we examined the video version in 2014 we decided that the language (use of the word "bloody"), the injury detail and the racially offensive comment "except for Dennis, and you can't tell him from all the others can you" were more appropriate at the PG category in line with the BBFC Classification Guidelines at the time.' The notable difference here from 1985 does seem to be the increased sensitivity towards racist terminology, as both the injury detail and the language had been debated on its original release.[30]

In the conclusion to his study of British film censorship, James C. Robertson argues that all censorship is to a greater or lesser extent 'an instrument of social control'.[31] As such it has often been a tool used by governments or other pressure groups to regulate according to their own social anxieties or unease. In relation to young audiences this has made it particularly susceptible to what Osborn and Sinclair describe as a 'broader moral panic'.[32] *Terry on the Fence* was originally objected to due to its language and criminality, but most of all because of a parent mistreating a child. The latter touches on a cornerstone of censorship policy in relation to children, that they need to be protected from scenes which are too disturbing in terms of their encounter with the adult world. However, the rationale for this in

relation to *Terry on the Fence* seems dubious when the issue of bullying and child abuse are clearly of concern to children themselves in their own experience. The depiction of criminal behaviour and use of vulgar language relates to a different form of perceived 'harm', one where the risk is imitation. The claim here seems more tenuous considering the mild nature of the language used and the clear moral structure of the film's narrative. In the circumstances, the BBFC's initial response to the film is indicative of the contingent nature of censorship and tells us more about the anxieties of a 1980s Britain at unease with itself.

Acknowledgements: The assistance of the British Board of Film Classification is gratefully acknowledged by the author. The primary research for this article was made possible by a Fellowship award from the Leverhulme Trust.

---

[1] Terry Staples, *All Pals Together: The Story of Children's Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 1-10.
[2] Julian Petley, *Film and Video Censorship in Modern Britain* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 88-93.
[3] Staples, *All Pals Together*, 1-2.
[4] Robert Shail, *The Children's Film Foundation: History and Legacy* (London: Palgrave/British Film Institute, 2016), 25-6.
[5] Anon., *Progress Report: The CFF in the Sixties* (London: Children's Film Foundation 1964).
[6] Anon., *Saturday Morning Cinema: A Report of the CFF in the Sixties with a Full Catalogue of CFF Films* (London: Children's Film Foundation, 1967).
[7] Shail, *The Children's Film Foundation*, 150-51.
[8] John Trevelyan, *What the Censor Saw* (London: Michael Joseph, 1973), 59.
[9] Staples, *All Pals Together,* 213.
[10] Petley, *Film and Video Censorship,* 3.
[11] Trevelyan, *What the Censor Saw*, 59.
[12] Ibid, 81-6.
[13] John Trevelyan, 'The Censor looks at Children's Films', *Journal of the Society of Film and Television Arts*, 18 (Winter 1964-5), 21.
[14] Alison James and Adrian L. James, *Constructing Childhood: Theory, Practice and Social Practice* (London: Palgrave, 2004), 13.
[15] Alison James, Chris Jenks and Alan Prout, *Theorizing Childhood* (Cambridge: Polity, 1998), 13-15.
[16] Ibid, 10-13.
[17] See the BBFC file for *Haunters of the Deep*.
[18] BBFC file for *Break Out*.
[19] BBFC file for *Terry on the Fence*.
[20] Memo contained in the BBFC file for *Terry on the Fence*.
[21] BBFC file for *Out of the Darkness*.
[22] Letter dated 12 November 1985 from Eyeline to the BBFC contained in the file for *Terry on the Fence*.
[23] Letter dated 26 November 1985 from Eyeline to the BBFC contained in the file for *Terry on the Fence*.
[24] Shail, *The Children's Film Foundation,* 99.
[25] See the booklet interview with Bernard Ashley in the BFI DVD *Runaways* (2014).
[26] See the BBFC file for *Terry on the Fence*.
[27] Sian Barber, *Censoring the 1970s: The BBFC and the Decade that Taste Forgot* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing), 134.
[28] Tom Dewe Mathews, *Censored* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1994), 1-3.
[29] Petley, *Film and Video Censorship*, 93-4.
[30] Email correspondence between the author and the BBFC; response from the BBFC received 17 May 2016.

[31] James C. Robertson, *The Hidden Cinema: British Film Censorship in Action, 1913-1975* (London: Routledge, 2004), 161.
[32] Guy Osborn and Alex Sinclair, 'The "Poacher Turned Gamekeeper": James Ferman and the Increasing Intervention of the Law', in *Behind the Scenes at the BBFC: Film Classification from the Silver Screen to the Digital Age*, ed. E. Lamberti (London: Palgrave/British Film Institute, 2012), 101.

Robert Shail is Professor of Film and Director of Research in the School of Film, Music and Performing Arts at Leeds Beckett University. He is widely published on postwar British cinema, masculinity in film, stardom, and British film directors. More recently his research has focussed on children's media. His monograph, *The Children's Film Foundation: History and Legacy* (Palgrave/BFI, 2016) was supported by a Leverhulme Fellowship.