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THE NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

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"INDECENT, OBSCENE AND BLASPHEMOUS"
-A STUDY OF FILM CENSORSHIP IN IRELAND, 1909-1988

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- INTRODUCTION -

Every time a new discovery, idea or invention is unleashed on a society, it is usually followed by a backlash of suspicion, fear and paranoia coming from the more conservative elements of that society. The advent of the motion-picture was no exception. No sooner had the Lumière brothers 1895 invention developed enough to reach a mass audience than the moral crusaders were out in force. Dramatic stories abounded of the cinema's destructive influence. It was seen as empty fodder for the mind, and a corruptor of youth. By the early 1920's, every Western nation had some sort of control over the type of films it would allow its citizens to see. The amount and extent of this censorship varied from country to country, depending on the cultures of each.

The history of censorship of the Arts in a specific country is a wide-ranging area of study, as most of a society's attitudes can be measured by its degree of tolerance towards the varied ideas expressed in print, theatres and galleries. What I wish to do here is to document the history of film censorship in Ireland from 1909 (when the first Irish cinema opened) to the present day. Certain areas will be concentrated on in order to achieve this aim.

Any available references to, and quotations from major pressure group spokesmen will be used to give an idea of the

general climate of feeling towards cinema at any given time. Thus, the reactions of British Military censors, Irish Church leaders and politicians to the state of the film industry will be dealt with. The terms of reference of the Film Censor will be examined, and I will put forward an opinion on how the application of the wording changed, especially during the 'Sixties and 'Seventies. As a means of direct comparison, an outline of the systems of film censorship in Britain and the United States will be given. Virtually all the films we see in Ireland originate from these two countries, so how easy a passage through the Irish censorship system such a film receives, is an indication of how our system compares with the British and American counterparts.

In the Republic of Ireland since 1923 (the beginnings of the State) over three thousand films have been banned by the censors, and over eight thousand cut. Unfortunately, it has always been the policy of the Department of Justice to restrict information about censorship decisions from the public. Neither the titles of movies banned nor specific information about the length or positions of cuts have ever been made available. Annual reports from the Censors Office are published, but they only list the total number of films submitted, passed, cut and banned. The more detailed records, including statements from the Censor and the Appeal Board concerning censorship policy have been acknowledged but not released by the Department of Justice.

In keeping with this policy of secrecy, the Censor himself

generally tends to keep a very low profile. Attempting to arrange an interview with the current holder of the office, Mr. Seamus Smith, I was told by a spokesman that he never gave interviews for fear of being misquoted. Undaunted, I arrived one afternoon at the censors office and actually ran into Mr. Smith on a corridor. On realising that I wished to speak with him however, he dashed off hurriedly, mumbling that his Secretary would deal with me. The Secretary merely repeated the 'never gives interviews' line and added "Whether he decides to cut a film or not is his own business, and he doesn't have to explain his decisions".

The Irish public are prevented from knowing what they are prevented from seeing on their cinema screens. This, in itself, gives some indication as to how restrictive our society can be.

THE BIRTH OF CENSORSHIP IN BRITAIN AND THE U.S.

The earliest legislation anywhere that dealt with controlling film shows was Britains Cinematograph Act of 1909, which was implemented by the local authorities. Its purpose was a general one : "to make better provisions for securing safety at cinematographic and other exhibitions".¹ The London County Council used the Act to require cinemas to stay closed on Sundays and consequently one of the film companies complained on the grounds that such a ruling was outside the scope of the Act. However, they were told in the High Court by the Lord Chief Justice that local authorities could impose whatever conditions they chose so long as they were not unreasonable. The Cinematograph Act is unchanged today, and that High Court decision opened the way to the present system of film censorship in Britain, in which local authorities have the power to vet the content of films to be shown in the cinemas of their area.

This arrangement was far from acceptable to the film companies, for whom the prospect of having to deliver different versions of the same film to each little district in the country was alarming. So, in 1913, the film industry itself set up the British Board of Film Censors, in the hope that the board would win acceptance by local authorities as being a dependable censoring body for all. There was initial

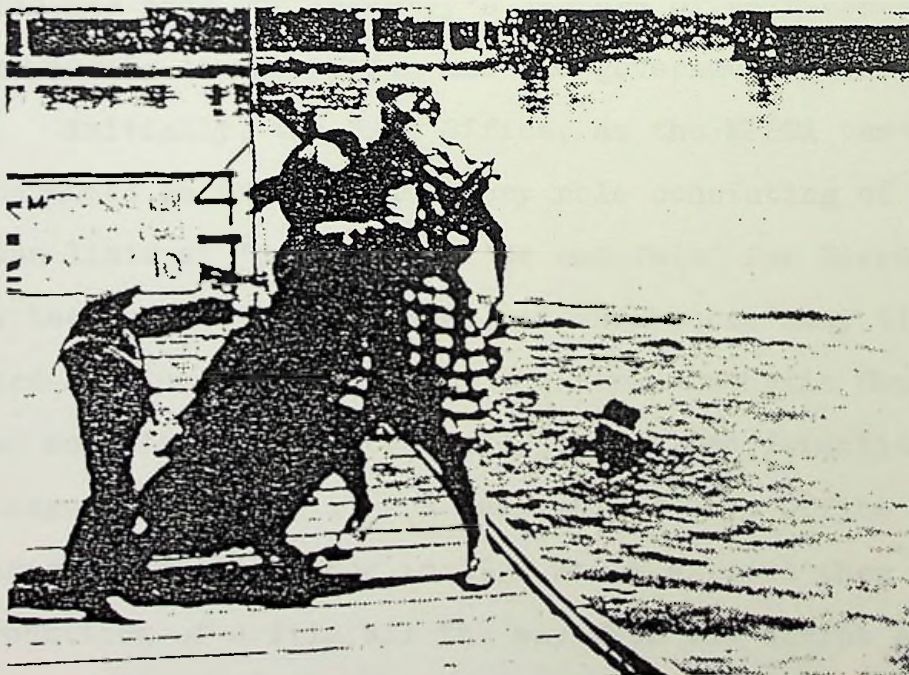
wariness, but by the 1920's the BBFC had won universal acceptance, mainly thanks to a respected ex-M.P., T.P. O'Connor, becoming a censor.

Since then, despite legally having but an advisory role, the decisions of the BBFC are unquestioned. In 1967 Joseph Stricks' 'Ulysses' was not granted a certificate, yet it was permitted exhibition by certain local councils, notably in Central London. Conversely, in 1979, the comedy satire 'Monty Pythons Life of Brian' did win a limited BBFC certificate, but was subsequently banned in many regional areas.

A similar set-up to the British situation evolved in the United States. Since the earliest days of the nickelodeon, moralists and reformers had agitated against the corrupting nature of the movies and their effects upon American youth. Powerful pressure groups, often working through religious organisations, had been formed to protect American audiences from morally questionable material on their screens. Hollywood producers, virtually all immigrant Jews, were initially loath to combat the Christian moral majority. After the First World War however, a new morality developed in America known as the Jazz Era, a period of free and uncontrolled conduct. The content of American films became increasingly sophisticated and risqué. Suddenly they began to depict and even glorify adultery, divorce and drinking.

Simultaneously, real-life Hollywood was undergoing its

transformation into a Twentieth Century Babylon, with its huge mansions, wild parties, sexual promiscuity and multiple divorce. Film Stars became worshipped by the public as a kind of American royalty, or as a race of gods existing on the higher plane of Beverly Hills. Of course, these 'gods' were just as human as anyone else, and the media attention that strove to raise them were just as ready to knock them down. A series of major Hollywood scandals hit the headlines in the early 1920's - scandals that gave strength to the reformers case. These included actress Mary Pickford in an apparently fraudulent divorce testimony, comedy actor 'Fatty' Arbuckle in a rape and murder trial and director William Desmond Taylor in a murder case.



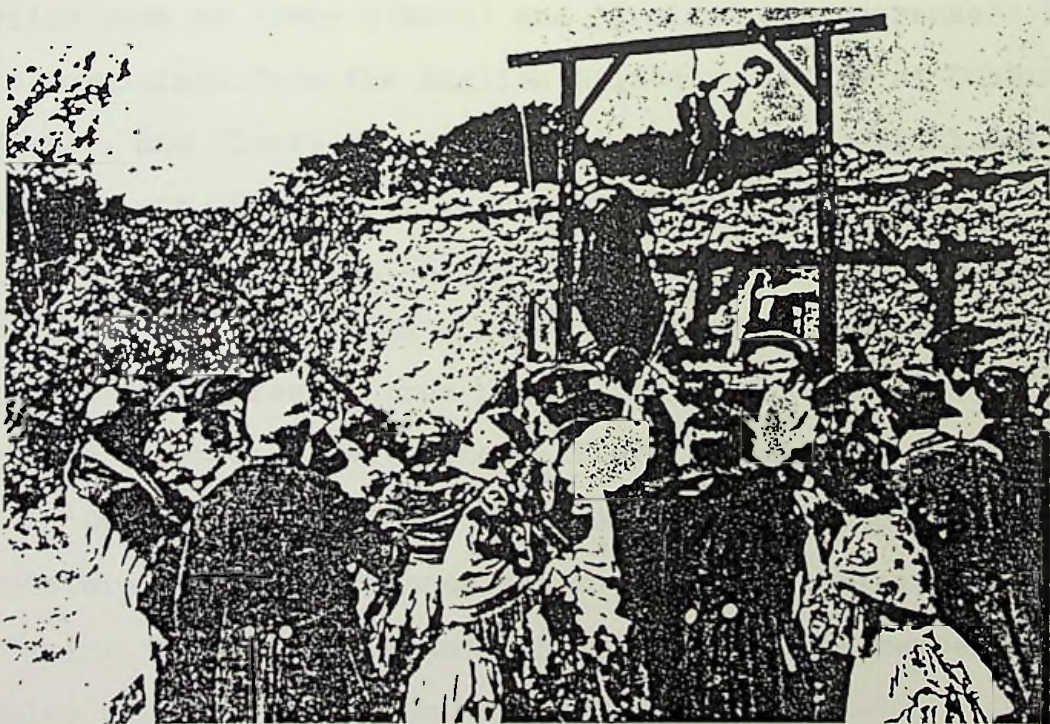
ROScoe 'FATTY' ARBUCKLE in a Sennett short. (1915)

Drawing mainly on this real and imaginary depravity, both on and off the screen, the so-called moral majority created a storm of public outrage against Hollywood. The moralistic backlash came from all sides. Ministers and Priests forbade their parishioners to go to the movies, editorial denunciations came from established and respected magazines and mass boycotts were demanded by Womens Clubs and reform groups. By early 1922, most of the States, and the Federal Government itself, were considering the enactment of censorship laws.

In response, the frightened Hollywood producers set up a self-regulating body for the film industry. In March 1922, the Motion Picture Producers & Distributors of America (MPPDA) was formed, and amid much publicity they hired an ultra-conservative Republican, Will H. Hays, to head it. His presence made the industry's gesture of self-censorship convincing to the public and the government alike.

Initially, the Hays Office, as the MPPDA came to be known, conducted an informal advisory role consisting of little more than lists of 'Don'ts' and 'Be carefuls' for Directors. By the early 1930's however, it had become many times more hard-hitting, spurred on by the Roman Catholic Church, which had mobilised its forces in 1931 with the formation of the 'League of Decency'. A reorganised Hays Office issued a strict Production Code in 1934 which allowed them to follow production of a film all the way from the script stage through to the final editing. This notorious vetting procedure had a firm grip on the industry for over two decades.

It might be thought that a censorship system set up by the film industry itself would be more sympathetic to cinematic freedom than a system enforced by a government. This, as the parallel histories of the BBFC and the Hays Office can reveal, is not necessarily the case. Neither body really concerned themselves with liaising with pressure groups or balancing creative license with the prevailing moral climate. Instead, both developed codes of practise that ensured that all films fell in with the ideological requirements of the dominant pressure groups in their country. In Britain this was the influence of the establishment, the Conservative Party and the Church. In the United States it was the influence of the Roman Catholic Church and big business which became dominant.



Sidney Olcotts' 'RORY O' MORE' (1911)

·ENGLISH RULE & IRISH LAW

From the earliest days of cinema in Ireland, it became evident that politics and religion were to be the main forces behind censorship. The first man to have to learn this fact the hard way was Sidney Olcott, top director of the American film company, Kalem. Between 1910 and 1914 Olcott, an Irish-American, made dozens of films in Ireland, mainly in the village of Beaufort, Co. Kerry. His own nationalist sympathies were evident in his film themes. These were mainly historical dramas that unfavourably portrayed English rule in Ireland and also characterised the clergy as ineffectual bystanders in an armed struggle. Films such as 'Rory O'More' and 'Ireland the Oppressed' led to complaints from the English Military Censors at Dublin Castle, and Olcott was ordered to change his subject matter. However, in 1914 Olcott returned to nationalist themes with 'Bold Emmet, Irelands Martyr' made for his own production company. Once again, the British censors objected to the film and actually withdrew it from public exhibition, complaining that it was interfering with the military recruitment drive in Ireland.

Opposition to Olcott also came from the Church, sometimes delivered with exceptional venom. On one occasion, while filming 'The Colleen Bawn' (1911) the Catholic members of the Kalem unit were given an unpleasant surprise:

"At Mass one Sunday, the local priest substituted for his usual sermon a verbal assault on the 'tramp photographers' who had invaded the peace and quiet of Beaufort. These intruders, he said, were posturing as Irishmen, portraying the Irish as gypsies and ne'er-do-wells - worse, they were even donning the priestly garb and were making a mockery of all that Irish people held most sacred. He had himself seen two members of the film company with painted faces making love before the camera in a churchyard, thus desecrating the bones of his parishioners' ancestors, and he was perturbed to know that some local lads and lassies were , for a few paltry shillings, selling their souls to the devil by taking part in these vile activities. There was much more in a similar vein, culminating in an appeal to the sturdy men from the Gap of Dunloe to drive out this menace to faith and morals" ²



Sidney Olcotts' 'THE COLLEEN BAWN' (1911)

Walter MacNamara was another Irish-American film-maker who experienced opposition to his subject matter. During 1914, he filmed a historical drama entitled 'Ireland A Nation' filmed at Kew Studios, Twickenham, London with the exteriors shot on location in Ireland. The material centred around Grattan's Parliament, the 1798 Rebellion, the Act of Union and the 1803 Rebellion. It was less than supportive of constitutional nationalism and was aimed mainly at an Irish-American audience. The film was a huge success in America but in Ireland the authorities were wary.

Firstly, it was substantially cut by the Military Press Censor before screening was allowed. Then, after just three days of the films run, it was banned outright by Military Headquarters, following the reports of Police Officers who had been assigned to attend the first few screenings. One such report accused the film of being "likely to cause disaffection, owing to the cheering of the crowd". Another report stated "the murder of a British soldier by a rebel was greeted with prolonged and enthusiastic applause ... (there were) continuous seditious and traitorous cries" ³ Irish audiences had to wait until 1922 and Independence before they had another opportunity to see 'Ireland A Nation'. Huge crowds attended the film, which restarted its run in Dublin, just three weeks after the Anglo-Irish Treaty had been approved by the new Dail Eireann.

Ireland won independence just as the British Board of Film Censors was finding its feet. Seeking to fill the gap

caused by the BBFC's departure from Irish affairs, the Public Health Committee of Dublin Corporation appointed twenty-two censors, six each to be selected by the Catholic and Protestant Archbishops of Dublin. This system proved to be totally unworkable, so the Corporation then called on the Government to legislate for a National Film Censorship. Further pressure came from various groups of 'moral crusaders' such as the Irish Vigilance Association, the Priest Social Guild and the Social Reform Committee. In 1923 a delegation from these and other groups including the major churches met the Minister for Home Affairs, Kevin O'Higgins. Soon afterwards, O'Higgins introduced the Film Censorship Bill to the Dail, saying that he had met a "thoroughly representative delegation".

The Government debates on the Bill well illustrate the kinds of fears and prejudices people had towards this 'alien' medium. One Professor William Magennis was particularly worried: "People, especially the rising generation, require to be protected from an environment that is not conducive to good morals, and they require to be saved from themselves... The loose views and vile lowering of standards that belong to other races and other people are being forced upon our people through the popularity of the Cinematograph" ⁴

The Censorship of Films Act 1923 was given speedy passage through both Houses, becoming one of the first pieces of legislation to be passed by the Free State Government. The

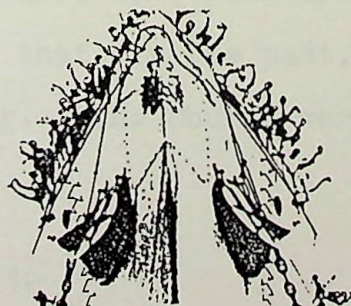
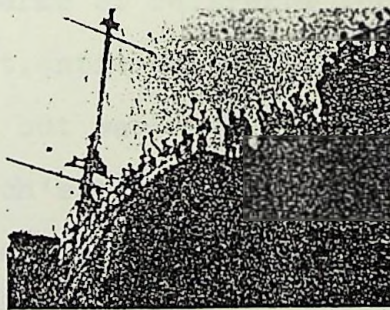
Act provided for a Film Censor, who was not to grant any film a certificate if he was of the opinion that it was "indecent, obscene or blasphemous" or "would be subversive to public morality". The Act also provided for a twelve-member Appeals Board, who could review the Censors decision if requested to do so by a Film Distributor. The following year an amendment was introduced to bring the public display of Posters and advertising materials under the censors jurisdiction.

James Montgomery, previously an employee of Bolands Bakery, became the first to fill the new Post. When asked on his appointment, how much he knew about films he is said to have replied: "Nothing, but I know the Ten Commandments". In his first full year in Office Montgomery banned 104 and cut 166 out of a total of 1307 films and trailers submitted to him. It is thought that this may be translated to upwards of fifty per cent of Feature Films submitted having been interfered with (taking trailers, shorts and educational films into account). However, because of the Governments policy of non-publication of detailed reports, this figure is estimated. Montgomery's heavy-handed approach continued in subsequent years, at one point eliciting a response from Film Producers in the United States, who threatened to boycott the Irish Market unless the Censor was less restrictive. Montgomery replied (with the backing of the Appeals Board) that they would rather have no films than those which were banned. (In the U.S. this comment went down well with those advocating strict censorship for the MPPDA).

A further amendment to the Law was introduced in 1930, that gave the Censor the power to censor sound as well as pictures. For over a year previous to this 'talkies' had been shown in Ireland, but Mr. Montgomery, not having been issued with a sound projector, had had to include the legend "plot and sound not censored" on his certificates.

CHURCH & STATE

During the 1930's while the cinema developed as a major source of entertainment in Ireland (181 cinemas in 1935) the dual forces of religion and politics were doing their best to keep Irish Screens free from unwelcome 'foreign' ideas. The pages of the Magazine 'Irish Catholic', an Official Church Publication, reflected the defensiveness and paranoia of the time : "We have let things slide. We have allowed men and women who are unmoral or with pagan notions of morality dictate the nature of our amusements and the forms of our instructions".⁵ When Eisensteins banned 'Battleship Potemkin' was screened to a private audience in Dublin by the Theatre Guild, the same Magazine attacked it with venom: "It can only be considered as the thin edge of the wedge, preparatory to the introduction of more advanced Communistic doctrine by film ... The supply of Soviet poison must be cut off."⁶



Sequence from Sergei Eisensteins' 'BATTLESHIP POTEMKIN'

The Church in Ireland were supportive of the American 'League of Decency' which was dictating the policies of the Hays Office to a large extent during the 1930's. It was generally believed among the clergy, however, that Ireland should go further. 'Up and Doing' another Catholic Paper, commented :

"The approval of a film by the League of Decency is no guarantee that the Film Censor in the Free State won't be called upon to use his scissors or to reject the film." ⁷

One of the most vocal pro-censorship propagandists for the Catholic Church was Fr. Richard Devane, who wrote a series of articles at this time entitled 'National Film Control' in which he cited South Africa as a model for the development of Irish film culture. Devane was a believer in a totally home-produced film industry, under direct National control, to the exclusion of all foreign productions. In 1937, he successfully lobbied the government to set up an enquiry into the cinema in Ireland, and was himself asked to propose the terms of reference for the Enquiry Committee. The report, entitled 'The Film in National Life', was completed in 1943, but was never published.

The Catholic Church's main worry was that the cinema opened up a view of the world. For the first time, Irish people could examine cultures different from their own, and learn about ways of life that, in the past, could only be experienced by emigrating. The Church were fearful that

Ireland's strong tradition of Catholicism would suffer from such diversions. As the Bishop of Down and Connor said in 1937 "(The Cinema) ... represents an outlook of life that either ignores religion or is openly anti-Catholic." ⁸

The Bishop of Ossory put it more nostalgically : "In town and village and country place such attractions as the cinema and dance hall have sadly broken in on the sacred union of the family evening and there are real dangers that through this the Irish tradition of the Family Rosary will suffer" ⁹

Despite not being included in the terms of the Censorship of Films Act, political censorship was being practised during this period. In 1935 a Fianna Fail Ard Fheis resolution called for the banning of all films which might in any way be British propaganda. Montgomery had already begun to cut scenes depicting the Union Jack or members of the English Royal Family. With the outbreak of World War Two, Ireland's Emergency Powers Orders restricted films which could give offence to a 'friendly' foreign power. Some idea of the effect of the E.P.O. is indicated by the fact that in 1940, 22 out of the 29 feature movies banned, and 86 out of 131 cut, were censored because of the wide ranging Article 52 of the Orders, because they were adjudged to infringe our neutrality.

Among the banned films from this period was Charlie Chaplin's 'The Great Dictator' (1940). Commenting on

this particular film, the new Censor, Dr. Richard Hayes, showed that the art of censorship during his reign was, if anything, going to become stricter. "I thought it blatant and vulgar propaganda from beginning to end ... if the picture had been shown in this country it would have meant riots and bloodshed. I'm absolutely convinced of that." ¹⁰



*Chaplin's 'THE GREAT DICTATOR'
(1940)*

Hayes succeeded Montgomery as Film Censor in 1941, right in the middle of the E.P.O. years. Thanks mainly to an interview he gave to 'The Bell' Magazine in 1949, we have a good insight into his character and his methods. Hayes said that he based his decisions on the "simple moral code and the principles on which civilisation and family life are built. Any ignoring of these or any defiance of them in a picture bans it straight away as far as I'm concerned ...

the devil must not be presented in the guise of good, and when presented, must not tend to be debasing or subversive".

Although political censorship was outside of his role, (The E.P.O. were lifted in 1945) Hayes had no scruples about keeping the Soviet menace at bay : "Anything advocating Communism or presenting it in an unduly favorable light gets the knife" And in describing what he cut most, he said: "lascivious dancing. There's an appalling spate of this kind of dancing in most of the big American 'musicals'. Appalling. Simply appalling - And such vulgarity! " All this, certainly made some impression on the interviewer. In describing Hayes he said it was unfortunate for those who had "never heard him hiss, like an empty syphon, the word 'lascivious' or splutter the word 'filth' so that it sounds like the delayed reaction of a damp Chinese Cracker".¹¹

Indeed, the extremities of Dr. Hayes' language are almost laughable forty years on, but it has to be remembered that this was an official representative of public opinion, and his statements were indicative of where the country's main power groups stood. Likewise the spiteful rantings of the 'Irish Catholic' magazine illustrate the distorted nationalism of the Church in Ireland at this time, a suspicious paranoid nationalism that could just as easily be called bigotry or racialism. This attitude wasn't reserved for the cinema alone. Popular dance music, modern books and any sports beyond the two or three established Gaelic games were condemned. Anything that had a suggestion of foreign

origin was distrusted and unwanted by the Church in Ireland, who were trying hard to keep the twentieth century at bay.

THE DECLINE OF THE HAYS OFFICE

Dr. Hayes' reign as Censor ended in January 1954. The offices of his successors, Dr Martin Brennan (1954-56) and Liam O'Hara (1956-64) are memorable only for a steady increase in the number of movies banned. Under O'Hara, this averaged at about 10% of all feature movies (compared with a little over 5% towards the end of Hayes' reign). The appointment of Dr. Christopher Macken, in 1964, however, had a more sudden and dramatic effect on the annual figures. This was Dr. Macken's reaction to a time of great change in the content of films worldwide.

This change was mainly due to the dismantling of the Hays Office in the United States. The arrival of television in the early 1950's meant that the cinema ceased to be the dominant mass medium of the people. Consequently, the criteria for film censorship were eased as cinemas came under greater commercial pressure to hang on to their audiences. For economic reasons, the value of the Hays Office to the industry, was being increasingly questioned.

The Hays Office were also experiencing legality problems. In 1952, the Supreme Court reversed a banning order on an Italian film 'The Miracle' by Rossellini, which the Office had claimed to be sacrilegious. The Court ruled that censoring a film as sacrilegious could not be permitted as it

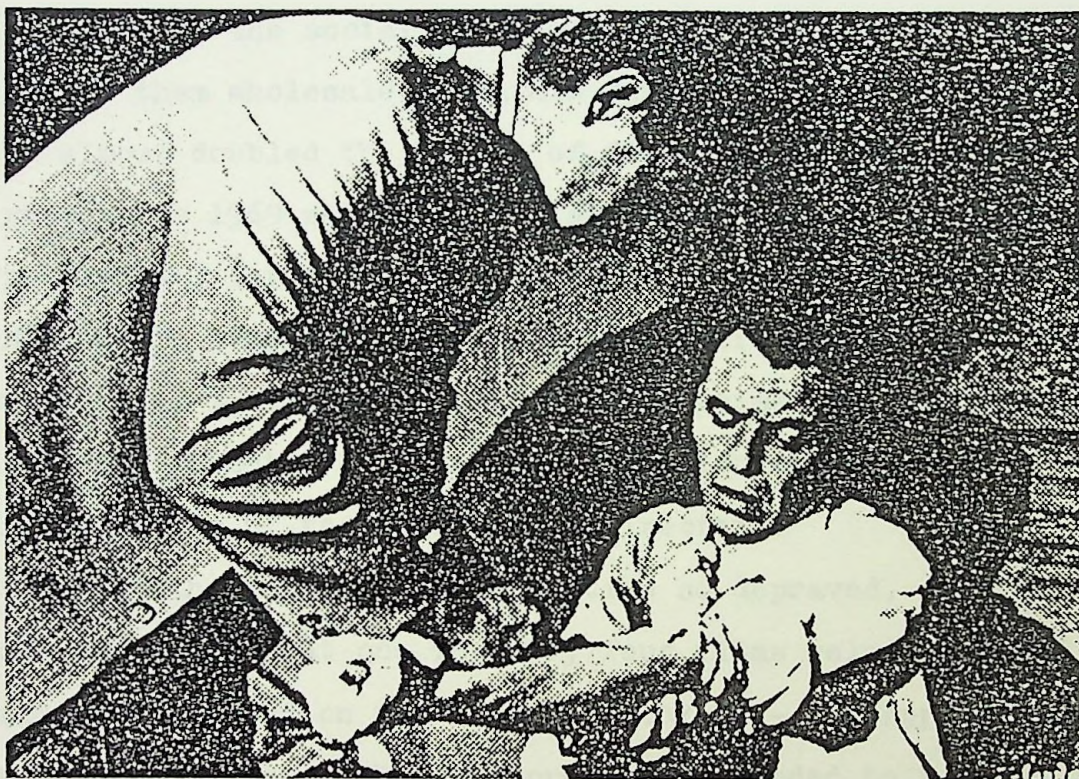
would favour one religion over another. A similar decision on the use of the word 'obscene' was made in 1957. In a case concerning a John Cleland novel 'Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure' the Court required that, to be banned as 'obscene' the work in question should lack all redeeming social value. This decision, although given in relation to a novel, was equally relevant to film censorship. The narrow definition of the word severely restricted the activities of the Hays Office from then on.

Further blows to the Hays Office came from the United Artists Film Company, who decided to release two films by Otto Preminger without certificates from the censors. The Hays Office had refused to pass 'The Moon is Blue' (1953) because it dealt with adultery, retained the words 'virgin', 'mistress' and 'seduction' and treated the whole affair in a comic manner. 'The Man with the Golden Arm' (1956) was rejected because it dealt with drug-taking. Both films were commercially successful, proving that Hays Office approval was not necessary for a film's success. Preminger's accomplishment, coupled with the Supreme Court's rulings constituted a major cinematic breakthrough for the America of the 'sixties. Directors became unharnessed from the burden of censorship, and movies, inspired by the mood of the times, became freer and more provocative both in their themes and treatment. Explicit sex scenes became no longer taboo on the screen.

The decline of the Hays Office led to the resurgence of a number of citizens pressure groups. Finding it increasingly difficult to legally ban a movie following the Supreme Court's 'obscenity' decision, some local authorities resorted to extra-legal tactics against exhibitors. Arrests and confiscations were used as techniques for harassment. A similar situation to that of the 1920's had arose, and it was obvious that some sort of control was necessary. Once again, acting under the threat of local state censorship boards, the film companies hastily agreed on a classification scheme for films which would be acceptable to all sections of the trade. In October 1968 the industry's classification scheme was officially announced. There would be four ratings : 'G' (general) - open to all; 'M' (mature) - recommended for mature audiences; 'R' (restricted) - to which under 16's had to be accompanied by a parent; and 'X' - banned to all audiences under 16. This scheme, apart from a couple of minor modifications - the 'M' classification has become 'PG' (Parental Guidance) and the 16 year old limit has been raised to 17 - is still in force today.

The advent of television naturally had the same effects on cinema attendances in Britain as in the United States. The easing of censorship was just one necessary tactic in this battle to hang on to audiences. In 1958, the B.B.F.C. acquired a new Secretary, John Trevelyan, who reorganised

the distribution of power within the organisation, effectively ousting the influence of the government from its decisions. The net result was that political intervention in censorship declined and the criteria for censorship requirements began to be centred mainly on questions of artistic taste in relation to nudity, sexual behaviour and obscenity.



Frank Sinatra shooting dope in Otto Premingers' 'THE MAN WITH THE GOLDEN ARM'.

'SIXTIES PURGES & 'SEVENTIES CHANGES

When Dr. Christopher Macken took up office as Irish Film Censor in 1964, he was just in time to view the effects of this new liberalisation of the part of the American and British censorship systems. Dr. Macken's reaction to the social realism of 1960's movies was simply to ban them wholesale. In his very first year in office, he almost doubled the number of films banned the previous year. In 1969 and 1970, an incredible one in four films put forward for distribution were being banned outright by Macken. "I suppose I have a better understanding of human nature due to my medical career" he claimed at the time of his appointment".¹² Evidently he didn't think much of the human nature of the worlds film directors.

Was the cinema of the 'sixties so depraved, corrupt and dangerous that one in every four films released could not be inflicted on the Irish people? - The Appeal Board didn't think so. They had previously tended to reverse few of the censor's decisions - in 1962 reversing Liam O'Hora's decision to ban on just three out of the twenty cases brought for appeal. In 1971 there were a massive ninety-one appeals, and the Board reversed the decision on sixty-eight of them'. (That's a percentage jump from 15% to 75%). Indeed, that year the Board released nine of those ninety-one films without cuts, three of them for general exhibition!

This fact seems to be the ultimate mystery. How could the National Film Censor decide that a film is absolutely unpalatable, even for an exclusively adult audience - while a board of presumably equally intelligent people decide that in fact the film is harmless and is agreeable enough to allow the smallest child to see it. The Appeal Board had a busy time all through the Macken regime, as their annual number of viewings trebled. They consistently took a stand against Macken's decisions - on average, reversing his decisions over seventy per cent of the time. That such an anomaly didn't raise suspicions in the Department of Justice, or even raise questions in Dr. Macken's own head about his effectiveness at the job, shows how much the Department and their appointee really cared about film as an art form.

In fact, Macken was openly resentful of the idea that he might be unsuitable for the post, as journalist Ciaran Carty, found out when he voiced an opinion in the 'Sunday Independent' Newspaper in 1969:

"(Dr Macken) in response to my criticism that by banning an unprecedented number of movies he was creating a chaotic backlog at the Appeals Board, wrote to Independent Newspapers demanding an unqualified retraction and apology to 'undo, insofar as any apology now made can undo, the injury that has been done to me' ".¹³

Dr: Macken resigned in June 1971 through illness. In the last months of his regime, his functions were effectually taken over by his civil servant assistants who immediately put a stop to his indiscriminate banning. Dermot Breen, who became the new Censor in 1972, continued in this vein, using limited certificates a lot more, thus banning films a lot less. Breen was the first Censor to have any cinematic background. He was Director of the Cork Film Festival and he had been a member of the Appeals Board for a number of years. It was the Appeals Board during Macken's reign that initiated the use of limited certificates in Ireland. Having served there, Breen now brought this same policy to the censor's position. This was quite influential in the reformation of film censorship as the use of limited certificates is an admission that just because a film may be unsuitable for a child doesn't necessarily mean that it should be banned from everyone.

Breen also attempted to do away with the aura of secrecy that surrounded the office of censor. He appeared in public at meetings, gave press interviews, and made himself available to answer specific questions about his work (although still restricted from publishing detailed information).

Despite such welcome innovations, Breen wasn't quite the liberal he initially seemed. A speech he made at the Cork Rotary Club reveals a man who basically holds similar views as any of his predecessors. Although couched in more diplomatic terms, the basic sense of nationalistic superiority comes through:

"(There are) many insidious elements in our midst who were attempting to corrupt our society by upsetting many of our long-established institutions and traditions. Some of these groups, perhaps unwittingly or otherwise, were demanding and pressing for the removal of censorship of films, and indeed of all things that were considered decent in accordance with the normal standards of living in a well-ordered society. If we have, and I fear we have, masochistic, psychopathic and megalomaniac film directors, let them manufacture and present their expressions of their so-called art to morons of their own kind. These scenes have no place in cinema, let alone in a civilised intelligent society like ours".¹⁴

Although he banned few films during his four-year reign (1972-76) the figures show that Mr. Breen cut more than any other previous Censor. A large number of these cuts can be explained by the use of limited certificates. Film distributors, anxious to have their film open to as large an audience as possible, often agree to certain cuts if it will win them a certificate encompassing a wider age group. This is an acceptable practise dictated by the financial side of the movie business. However, Mr. Breen also liberally cut films that had decreed suitable only for an 'over 18' certificate. An entirely adult audience was still not considered mature enough to experience unexpurgated cinema.

"INDECENT, OBSCENE & BLASPHEMOUS"

Worldwide, censorship had long since gone into a new phase. The reorganisation of the American and British Systems had brought about a huge liberalisation in film production. Screenwriters and directors were restricted only by the boundaries of their own imaginations (and the abilities of their special-effects team). As we have seen, the Irish Censor during the 'Sixties, Dr. Macken, over-reacted disastrously to the challenge, wielding his scissors and refusing certificates at an enormous rate. Ten years later, the shock of the new seemed to have worn thin. From the mid-seventies on, there is a marked drop in the number of films banned and cut.

At the same time, other events were shaping the course of censorship in this country. In 1976, the first permanent cinema club was established in Dublin (at the Project Arts Centre), and in 1977 the Irish Film Theatre was formed. Clubs like these and the many others that sprung up in larger cities and the major universities used a loophole in the 1923 Censorship of Films Act to show films without interference from the Censor. Their status as private societies with a fixed membership meant that their film shows were not actually public screenings. As these clubs developed, they became a viable alternative for the distribution of the more controversial film matter.



Fassbinders' 'SATANS' BREW' (1976)

Frank Hall took over as Censor in late 1976 and the slow slide in the number of censored films continued. Mr. Hall wasn't the public-relations man that his predecessor, Mr. Breen, had been in office. Hall preferred to retreat back into the traditional image of the faceless, anonymous Censor. Although a well-known public figure due to his long career as an R.T.E. television personality, Hall was a veritable wall of silence when it came to talking about his censorial role.

Frank Hall saw out the 'seventies, cutting only a handful of films and banning a mere trickle. By this time the Film Censor had effectually become more a register of movies than a censor. The bulk of his work seemed to consist of classifying films for different age-groups. An outright banning became such a rarity as to merit wide media coverage when it did happen. Relative to the purges of previous times, cuts made to adult audience films became few. Although still working to the requirements of the

1923 Cinematograph Act, the Censor obviously had to redefine the boundaries of the wording of the Act. Some things became acceptable, others remained taboo.

If we return for a moment to the terms of reference as stated in the Act, we see that it covers anything the Censor considers "indecent, obscene or blasphemous" or that might be "subversive to public morality". The first two words, 'indecent' and 'obscene' are closely related and have been the mainstay of the Censors' decisions since the beginnings of the State. While, in certain ways, the application of these words tended to be relaxed during the 'seventies, in others it remained particularly stringent. Namely, a higher level of violence now became tolerated, but any degree of sexual explicitness was generally not, unless inherent violence was contained within the scene.

The newfound success of gory and sadistic scenes of violence in passing censorship worldwide had led to the development of a new genre in Hollywood. This was the 'Slash Movie' an exploitative mutation of the horror film of old. Films such as 'The Texas Chainsaw Massacre' and 'Friday the 13th' were basically little more than a series of distasteful murder scenes, graphically filmed and strung together with very little semblance of a plot. Film producers had found a new and lucrative formula, (at last count, 'Friday the 13th' was onto its sixth sequel!) and

advocates of censorship apparently had little objection to the material. Not least the Irish Censors, who passed 'The Texas Chainsaw Massacre' almost uncut, along with 'Frightmare', 'Schizo', 'Nightmare on Elm St.' and dozens of similarly infamous stomach-churners - Where dismemberment, torture and violent death are concerned the sky's the limit for the Irish adult cinemagoer.



'THE TEXAS CHAIN-SAW MASSACRE'



'NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET'

If we look at sex scenes, the Censors' tolerance is less noticeable, except in certain situations. Here's some examples : The Clint Eastwood film 'Magnum Force' included a scene depicting a love-making trio writhing around in ecstasy in a surprisingly explicit and drawn-out (by Irish standards) bedroom scene. It ends, however, when an intruder bursts in suddenly and shoots them all

dead with two huge handguns. Sam Peckinpah's World War Two film 'Cross of Iron' passed the Irish Censor with a scene intact that depicted a woman performing fellatio on a soldier, then biting his penis off. Martin Scorsese's critically acclaimed 'Taxi Driver' deals with a man deeply troubled by the moral decay of the society in which he lives. Throughout the film, there are numerous explicit sequences set in a sleazy New York brothel. The final scene shows the hero (played by Robert De Niro) taking the standard himself and embarking on a pillage of all things corrupt and indecent, killing a number of 'pimps' and freeing a child prostitute from their clutches. This climax is filmed with unprecedented realism and is certainly not for the squeamish.



Scorsese's 'TAXI DRIVER' (1976)

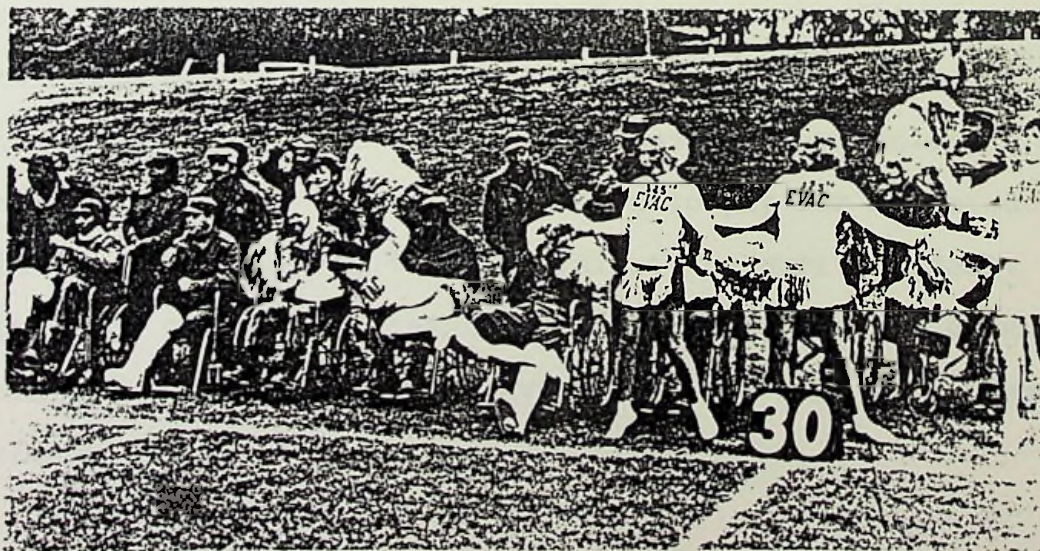
(a) De Niro as crusader.



(b) Jodie Foster as teenage prostitute.

In contrast, here are the scenarios of two popular American comedies of the late 'seventies : National Lampoons' 'Animal House' and Robert Altman's 'M.A.S.H.' The National Lampoon film is an old-fashioned college romp, dealing with the juvenile pranks of a group of university students. It is basically an amiable, light-hearted film without any pretensions or aspirations towards cinematic greatness. And while the odd nude body may grace the screen and a few vulgarities the soundtrack, it is by no means shocking.

'M.A.S.H.' covers similar ground, although with a bit more class and a bigger budget and star cast. The story follows the exploits of two surgeons at a U.S. Army Hospital in Korea as they play joke after practical joke on their fellow doctors in an effort to keep sane in a War situation. While our heroes bawdy jokes and lecherous advances on nurses make up the bulk of the fun, 'M.A.S.H.' couldn't be said to be particularly explicit.



Robert Altman's 'M.A.S.H.' (1974)

Here, finally, is the connection : While 'Magnum Force', 'Cross of Iron' and 'Taxi Driver' all passed the Irish Censor completely intact, 'Animal House' and 'M.A.S.H.' both had to be cut in parts before being granted a certificate here. The idea I'm alluding to here is that there is a basic puritanism behind the censors decision-making on sexual matters. The idea of sex for pleasure is abhorrent to this way of thinking, and if given the opportunity (through any scenes of sexual behaviour) the Censor will cut.

Two recent movies fell foul of this sense of puritanism in the film censor. Ken Russell's 'Crimes of Passion' (a critically acclaimed film) was banned in 1986 by our current Censor, Mr. Seamus Smith (who took over from Frank Hall in 1986). The story concerns a successful American businesswoman who leads an alternative existence by night as a high class prostitute - not because she needs the money or because she is being forced against her will but simply because she ENJOYS it. It was surely this fact that condemned the film for Mr. Smith (although the film does contain some quite steamy sex scenes). The idea of a successful and likeable character having a nonchalant attitude to sex, without being seen to pay for her misdeeds in the final reel is totally against the puritan ideal. The fact that the villains role is filled by a crazed and homicidal priest wouldn't have helped the film's chances either.

'Working Girls' (1986) is an American Film depicting life in a brothel. Rather than showing a bleak and hopeless place, the directors approach is to present the brothel like any other working environment - an everyday nine-to-five. The prostitutes are seen as intelligent, educated people, largely in control, while the men remain lost in their fantasies. This strong persuasive comment on prostitution was not banned outright by Mr. Smith, but the cuts insisted on by him were of such magnitude that the distributors withdrew the film. Again it was the overall attitude of the film that was distasteful to Mr. Smith. It treated sex with a deadpan humour and a matter-of-fact-ness, and it didn't offer any fire and brimstone in the form of moral redemption or eventual suffering for the 'working girls'.



Lizzie Borden 'WORKING GIRLS' (1986)

Censorship of a film's soundtrack is dealt with in a similar fashion. Most of what constitutes 'bad language' in our society are words that originally refer to sexual or excretory functions. Four letter words have become quite common on Irish screens the last twenty years or so, but the context is almost always one of abuse and hate. The same word is never so easily accepted by the Censor in its original context of love and desire. Thus, we are allowed to hear the expletive "F... off!" or "I'm going to blow your f...ing head off!" but we are not allowed to hear "I really want to f... you".

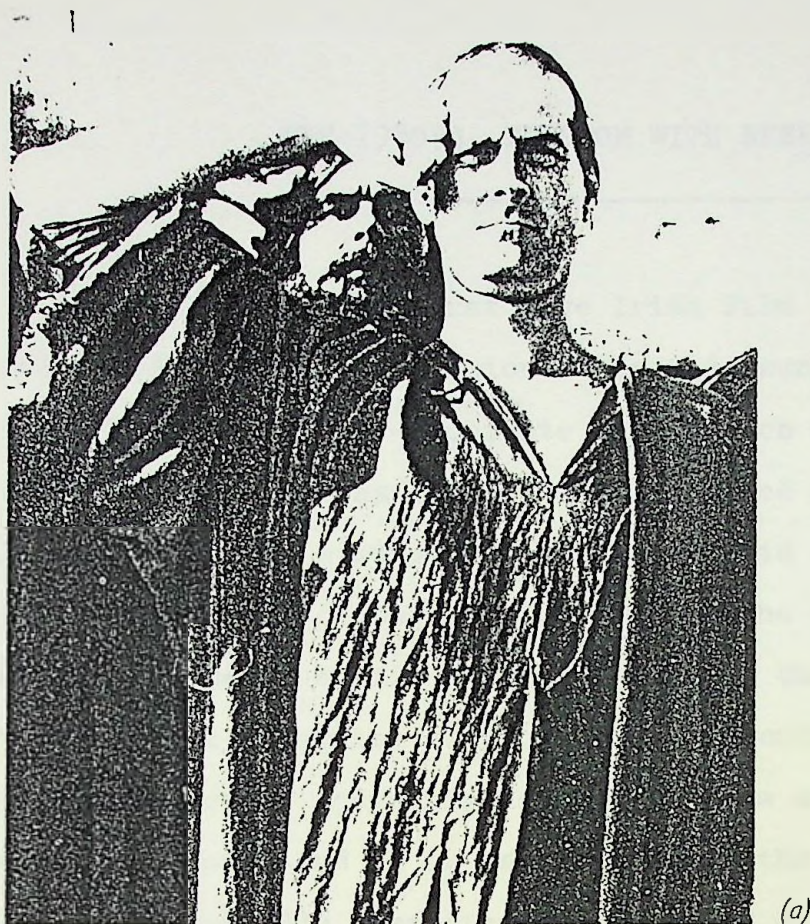
The modern Irish Film Censor doesn't ban specific actions or words - he bans attitudes, and the main attitude that prevails is that sex is evil and should be seen to be punished.

Returning once more to the Censors terms of reference as laid down in the 1923 Act, there was a third word involved, 'blasphemous', that we have passed over so far. Only once in the history of Irish Film Censorship has a film been banned purely because of its blasphemous content. That was in 1979, and Frank Hall was the trail-blazing censor involved. The film in question was 'Monty Pythons Life of Brian' a parody of all religious cliches from Hollywood biblical epics to Kitch Christmas Cards. Its close parallels with the life of Christ combined with the subversive nature of the team's comedy (made famous through their long-running TV series 'Monty Pythons Flying Circus') quickly made the film infamous. Upon release, it received widespread

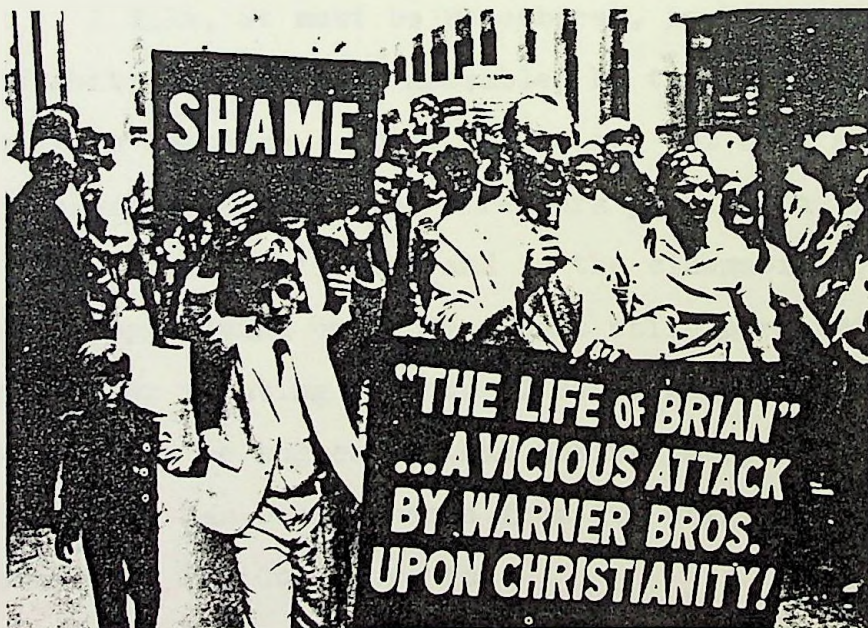
condemnation from religious group representatives all over the world, so Mr. Hall's decision to ban came as no surprise. Ireland thus had the dubious honour of joining South Africa in being the only two countries to ban the film altogether. (There were a number of decisions to ban taken at local council level in some of the South Eastern States of America and in a few regions of Central England.)

Mr. Hall's decision seemed to quell the tide of righteous indignation that was ready to burst from the Catholic Church. What might have happened if the film had been passed is shown by the fate of the L.P. featuring the film soundtrack, which was released in Ireland.

In January 1980, the 'Irish Independent' ran a story about the film and the record, headlined 'Blasphemy Beats the Censor'. Father Brian D'Arcy, known in Ireland as 'the showbiz priest' was quoted as saying that the film (which he had not seen) was blasphemous : "Anybody who buys the record and finds it funny must have something wrong with their mentality".¹⁵ Two days after this story appeared, the Dublin firm distributing the record announced that it was not importing any more 'Life of Brian' records - because they were getting threatening 'phone calls! The puritans propensity towards violence is not to be underestimated.



(a)



(b)

'MONTY PYTHON'S LIFE OF BRIAN' (1979)

(a) John Cleese in a scene from the film

(b) Anti- 'BRIAN' demonstration outside a cinema in Boston, U.S.A.

THE 1980'S. FREEDOM WITH RESERVATIONS

Three out of the first five Irish Film Censors were medical doctors by profession. Indeed, surgical experience has almost been a pre-requisite for the job which, down through the years has always been practised along similar lines to that of a surgeon. The Censor is concerned with the moral health of the public, and when he discovers offensive scenes within a film, he treats them as diseased tissue in an otherwise healthy body - he cuts them out. This practise of indiscriminate cutting is a denial of film as an art form, and is an insult to both the adult audience and to the world's respected and talented directors.

A film, it must be remembered, is basically a series of shots arranged and assembled by the director into a certain sequence. Once scenes are cut out, and the rest reassembled without the directors permission, it is no longer totally his work and is the cinematic equivalent of, say, improvising on a piano solo while performing a Beethoven piece, or painting out one of Van Goghs sunflowers! It might even be suggested that making the public pay to see a film that has been altered from its original state is a breach of The Consumers Act!

Happily, the 1980's seem to have brought some awareness of the artistic value of the cinema home to those concerned. In recent years film censorship is most certainly being

phased out. Even the practises outlined in the previous Chapter are dying out - slowly, as the cases of 'Crimes of Passion' and 'Working Girls' indicate, but still surely enough. No new laws or amendments to the Acts have been introduced, but an understanding seems to have developed between the Minister for Justice, the Censor and the Censorship of Films Appeals Board. The manner of executing the law has changed, quietly and unannounced. The Censor still retains the same right to ban, but in the last five years he has exercised this right only on a few occasions, notably for the previously mentioned 'Crimes of Passion' and for another film from the Monty Python team 'The Meaning of Life'. Little or no cuts have been made on any recent film release either.

This liberalisation isn't so much due to any new policy of our current Censor but more a coming in line with the rest of the world. Ideally, at this stage, the situation should be regularised. The Censor is basically a Registrar of movies, so he should be called such. He should have the power to classify films according to the usual age-groups, (General : Under-12 with adult; Over-15 & Over-18) but not the authority to cut films or ban them for over-18 audiences (excepting pornographic or other totally exploitative films which had no redeeming value of any kind, and these bannings would be subject to full appeal). All details of the Registrars decisions should be easily available to the public.

He should also have responsibility for ensuring that cinema managements were providing an adequate screening facility and were not themselves damaging programmes by introducing arbitrary breaks.

A step such as this would be a logical development considering how the system has evolved in recent years. It doesn't seem likely, however, - not in the near future at least. The Department of Justice would be terrified that another 'Crimes of Passion' would be released just after they had surrendered their trump card - causing outrage from the Church and embarrassment for themselves. The right to ban, even when not exercised, is still a nice safeguard against future uncertainties. So, despite the laudable improvements in the censorship system, it seems that there will always be some allowances for government intervention in film.

Indeed, the clean sheets on the censors reports don't tell the full story. What's not taken into account is the fact that the work of more challenging directors like Fassbinder and Godard are being channelled through the Irish Film Theatre and the various film societies, where a Censor's certificate is not necessary. Distributors recognise the limits of the Irish System and act accordingly. What chance would Godard's 'Hail Mary' have had in receiving a certificate if it had applied for one? The film, which took the bible story of the Virgin birth and placed it in a modern urban

setting, resulted in mass demonstrations and pickets from groups representing the Catholic moral majority when private University film societies held screenings during 1985.

Cases such as this illustrate that there is still a sizeable section of our society that would oppose any more leniency on the part of the Film Censor. It is perhaps unfair to unduly criticise the Censor, who is subjected to the wrath of these more conservative elements every time they take offence at a film. However, the fact remains that totally unrestricted cinematic freedom for adults is the only just situation for a democracy. Hopefully, such a situation will be legitimised in the not too distant future.

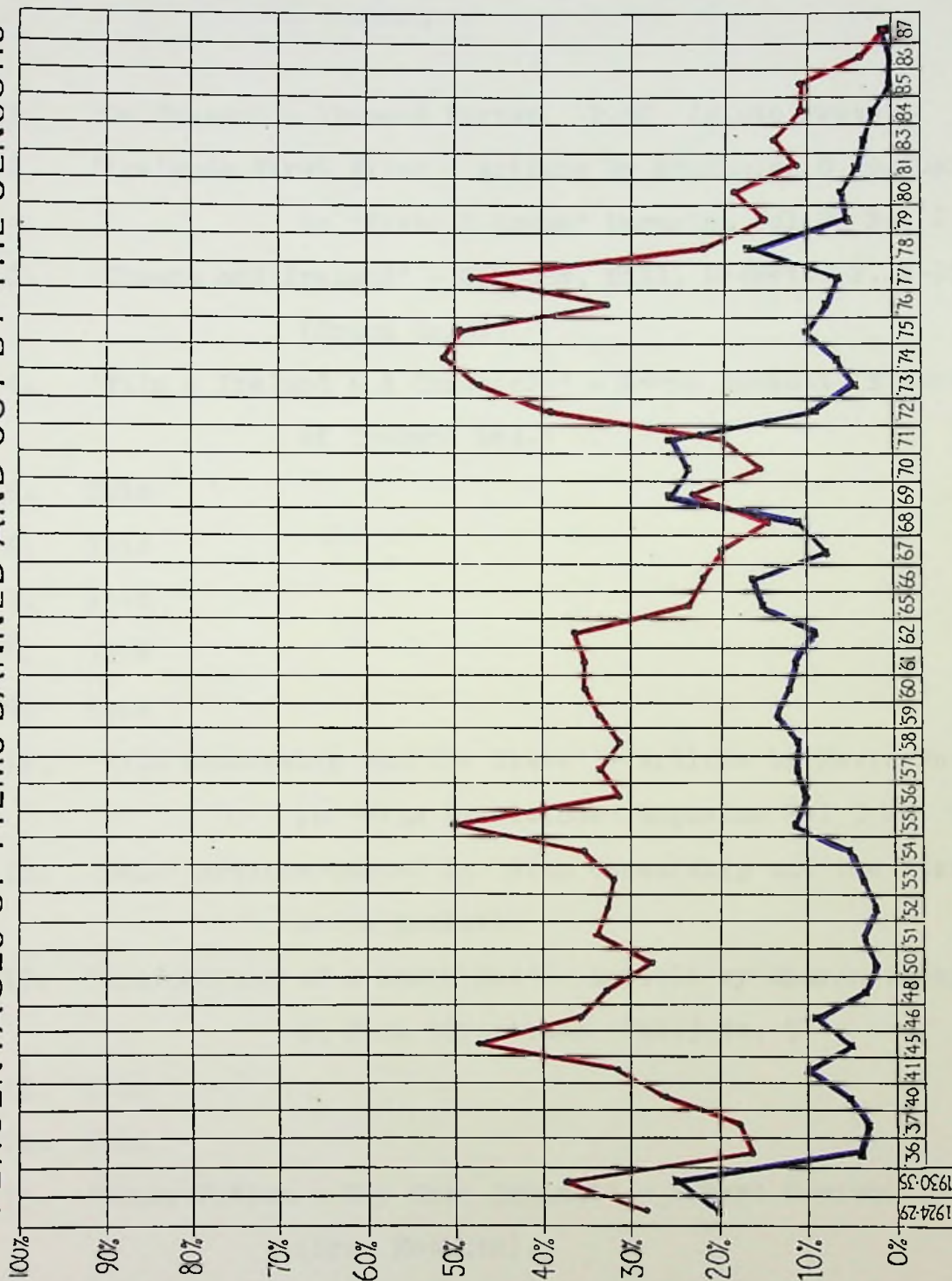
- CONCLUSION -

Ireland could never be regarded as being particularly tolerant to new ideas. This is due perhaps just as much to our nature as a race as it is to our economic position as a relatively backward nation. We have a reputation, not entirely unjustified, for being easy-going, indolent and somewhat suspicious of foreign intrusion.

As we have seen, our attitude towards the film medium down through the years has certainly mirrored this catagorisation. The law was strict and its implementation stricter, spurred on as it was by advocates of censorship from all sides. My references and quotations from the military, the clergy and the politicians indicate what kind of climate cinema had to grow up in. The change in attitudes towards leniency and acceptance has been slow and arduous, and is still not complete. Although, as I state in the final Chapters, freer policies were definitely introduced from the 'seventies onwards.

My outline of the British and American systems of censorship shows that, while their societies had reservations, there was still a climate democratic enough to allow for an amount of free expression and innovation. Our Censors were banning and cutting films that had already gone through BBFC and MPPDA scrutiny. This comparison further underlines where we have stood on the censorship issue. It was never a particularly tolerant stance. One can only hope that such repression is never allowed in the future.

PERCENTAGES OF FILMS BANNED AND CUT BY THE CENSORS



: PER CENT OF FILMS CUT

: PER CENT OF FILMS BANNED

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