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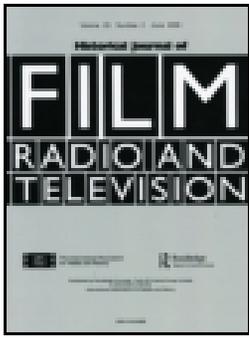
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BALLYMENA, BANGOR AND BELFAST: HYPER-LOCALISM, REGIONAL DECISION-MAKING AND LOCAL FILM CENSORSHIP IN NORTHERN IRELAND

Sian Barber

This article explores local film censorship in Northern Ireland, examining the ways in which individual local authorities and committees imposed their own conceptions of what was acceptable for the cinema-going public. Drawing on material from the Public Records Office Northern Ireland (PRONI) this work begins with the setting up of local censorship systems in the newly created Northern Irish state in the 1920s, and maps the interventions by a range of local councils across the decades including objections to films such as Frankenstein, The Outlaw and Garden of Eden. It offers a comparative focus of a specific geographical region and argues that understandings of film censorship must move beyond a straightforward national versus local model in order to acknowledge a more nuanced picture that encompasses local sensitivities, regional politics and religious feeling.

This article examines local film censorship in Northern Ireland and the role played by councils and local authorities in controlling film culture. It maps the interventions made by a range of local councils in the region and explores the motivations and justifications for their involvement in the censorship of film. Its purpose is less to document the objections made to different films across the decades, but rather to explore the differences which emerge between councils within the region in different periods. This exploration is set alongside the fluctuating and complex structures of power within the parallel systems of local and national censorship, how they were applied

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within Northern Ireland, and if the decisions of local authorities deviated from those made by the London based British Board of Film Censors (BBFC).

While acknowledging the valuable work undertaken on national censorship, this article seeks to move beyond recent text-based work on local censorship which considers the controversial films in different regions. In this way, its approach differs from the broadly text-based study of *Last Tango in Paris* and its reception in Belfast, Oxford and Newport and Kate Egan's exploration of *Monty Python's Life of Brian* in Harrogate, Swansea and Dudley.¹ Both of these earlier works focus on the specific actions of local councils towards particular films. However, the preliminary research for this piece indicated that a text based approach was not possible due to the evenness of the archival material and the relative paucity of references to specific films. This article instead adopts a film and cinema history approach, situating the processes of film censorship in a specific region within a broader social and cultural framework. In doing so it seeks to build on key interventions by scholars working within film history and audience studies, which acknowledge the importance of placing individual experiences and memories of cinema-going at the heart of its enquiry. While this article is not considering memories of cinema-going, it still fits within the model of consumption outlined by Richard Maltby in which he notes:

Every screening was the successful outcome of negotiations exchanged by mail, telegraph or telephone, and a sequence of physical journeys by air, sea, road and rail, in order to enable the audience's cultural encounter with a film's content through the delivery or a film print.²

A key element of this process which Maltby does not mention is censorship, specifically the local permission required for the exhibition of a film in a particular area. Maltby's suggestion of a model of cinema consumption helpfully foregrounds the importance of localized experiences and emphasise the specificities of place and location as determining factors in shaping the cinema experience. As Egan has shown censorship of cinema at local level and prohibitions placed on film by local authorities provokes a vocal and specific regional response. Similarly, Paul S Moore uses local newspapers to explore sites of promotion for the local cinema trade persuasively arguing that such local resources can elucidate patterns of localized cinemagoing and behaviour. He contends:

Cinema did not change how local publics congregated, how local businesses promoted themselves, or how local news was communicated; instead it fitted into the existing norms and routines of what was expected to be mentioned, advertised, noted as merely curious or reported about in detail.³

Moore describes this as 'networks of localities, sharing a common subcultural experience of mass culture.'⁴ I would develop this further and suggest that the existing networks and common experiences of culture which permeate local areas and are highlighted in these newspaper accounts are heavily rooted in the decision-making power vested in established local power structures. By drawing on the ideas outlined by Moore, and by shifting focus from newspaper archives to local government archives, and newspaper reports to local authority decisions, I will be situating my own explorations of local censorship council activity in this delicate hinterland of localized subculture and mass cultural experience. While these

sources differ to the those studied by Moore, the extensive collection of documents such as council minutes reflect similar concerns with purely local and regional issues to those captured in the pages of the local press. As will be shown, careful evaluation of council and committee documents can reveal the local issues which sit at the heart of cultural decision making.

My work explores a small region of the United Kingdom and draws upon the framework of local councils and authorities whose remit, if indeed they chose to exercise it, was to oversee and moderate content within cinema spaces in their local areas. In undertaking this exploration, notions of localized culture and of local taste, engagement with the mass medium of cinema, as well as the ever-changing ebb and flow of local politics are important factors to acknowledge. As Jacqueline Maingard considers in her work on cinemagoing in Cape Town, it is the specificities of the local that help us understand the importance of cinema in the lives of ordinary people. She observes: 'recognising the politics of District 6's demise and reconstruction is crucial for understanding local history.'⁵ Maltby also emphasises the importance of local factors, suggesting;

Close historical investigations of the everyday nature of local cinemagoing reveal how the resilient parochialism of individuals and communities incorporated and accommodated the passing content that occupied their screens to their local concerns and community experiences.⁶

As Egan has also shown, the importance of religion and the crossover between local council members and local chapel or church leaders directly shaped the council responses to *Monty Python's Life of Brian* and the significance and power of organised religion in Northern Ireland is a theme that will also emerge in this work. Taking inspiration from such locally specific work, and applying the same scrutiny to ideas of localism, this article adopts a regional approach, and a broad chronological sweep spanning the years from 1920 to 1970. It will highlight how material from different locations across the region indicates the discourses of regionality at work and reveal the nuances and complexities of local film culture, local sensitivities and localized notions of taste.

The specificities of region

Key to understanding regional decision-making is a deep and clear understanding of the region itself. Like many regions which embrace firm identity politics, debates about cinema and film culture in Northern Ireland have been and continue to be, informed by prevailing social, religious and political attitudes. As Hill notes, 'given the strong connection between region and politics in Northern Ireland it is not surprising that the religious and moral campaigns directed against the cinema should have acquired a distinctive character.'⁷

Yet moving beyond the morality campaigns of the 1930s (explored by Hill elsewhere) which drew attention to the harmfulness of the cinema and its impact on the young and impressionable, it is useful to consider if this Northern Irish distinctiveness is evident in later attitudes to film and cinema.⁸ Sam Manning has explored working-class audiences in the Holylands area of Belfast in the post-war

period and suggests that utilising the traditions of oral history and memory studies to gather local memories is illuminating, but it is also essential to understand the social and political background in which these memories emerged.⁹ As well as wanting to know details of audience experience, for example remembered responses to particular films, it is important to acknowledge that film culture in particular areas is shaped by what is available. This is not simply what films play in which cinemas, but what local audiences were *permitted* to see, and how control of exhibition by local councils actively determined what film material was available for consumption.

James Robertson's invaluable exploration of British film censorship presents a detailed picture of the activities of the British Board of Film Censors from its creation in 1912 until the late 1970s.¹⁰ Across his work, individual films emerge which proved challenging for the BBFC in different periods. As well as their treatment by the Board, Robertson also briefly records how these films were received in different local areas, referring to the activities of local councils. These references to local censorship offer snippets of information about the regional and localized processes at work, yet often raise further questions. For example, Robertson notes that the BBFC refused to grant a certificate to *The Wild One* in 1954 and that the film was subsequently banned in Brighton, Derby, Essex, Liverpool, Manchester, Oldham, Reading, Sheffield and Surrey.¹¹ However, the film was championed by Cambridge council who awarded it their own X certificate, in direct defiance of the BBFC, a decision copied by the councils of Belfast and Maesteg. These inconsistencies, which are not unusual within the idiosyncratic system of local film censorship, reveal how censorship of cinema cannot begin and end with the BBFC, but rather must take into account local council activity, local sensibilities and local activism. It also raises questions, particularly about the composition of the council film committee in Cambridge in 1954 and the justifications offered by the councils of Belfast and Maesteg in screening a film without a BBFC certificate. As Julian Petley has demonstrated in his case study of *The Devils* (1971), regional action on the film was shaped and promoted by local press coverage (much of written before the film was screened anywhere) and 'encouraged many local authorities to insist on viewing a growing number of films passed with an X by the BBFC and in certain cases to ban such films.'¹²

These brief examples highlight the fragmented and inconsistent nature of local censorship. Mike Hally's examination of the local authorities of Sale and Manchester also indicates how both these councils operated film censorship committees throughout the 1950s and 1960s yet made different decisions.¹³ As Hally points out, as well as placing them at odds with the BBFC, it also placed local councils in direct opposition to one another. My own exploration of Belfast focused on the changing cultural climate in the late 1960s and early 1970s and how strong pressure on the city council from local community groups impacted upon the film decisions being made.¹⁴ Similarly work by Rosalind Leveridge on the seaside town of Sidmouth, has identified the strong connections between local film exhibition and the local community and reveals how attitudes to film can be hard to disassociate from prevailing attitudes to local culture.¹⁵

Writing about cinema-going in rural Australia and the disparity between general and localized views, Kate Bowles noted that:

The gap between the local expectations attached to a particular picture show and the regulation of these expectations attached to a particular picture show, and the regulation of these expectations from the distant perspective of industry headquarters, is often at its widest in more marginal areas.¹⁶

Applying a similar approach to local censorship activity allows for a comparison between the smaller councils and the decisions made by the BBFC, but also between the outlying areas and the metropolitan centre thus offering further detail to the regional picture. Exploring local censorship offers an insight into the decision-making activities of local councils to control exhibition of films within particular local areas. But how did this autonomy work in practice and how did local councils know how to act upon their power to censor cinema?

Powers and processes of local film censorship

Work on a range of historical periods has shown that the BBFC were fully aware of the two-tier system of censorship, with local councils questioning or overturning their decisions, and that by and large they accepted these processes. It has also been shown that the BBFC actively utilised this system to test the waters for particular films that might offend.¹⁷ Yet, questions remain about how local councils acted on the powers offered to them by the Cinematograph Act of 1909 and what influenced their decisions. Robertson asserts that despite possessing the legal power to allow, ban or cut films, ‘many of the smaller local authorities have usually been content to follow the BBFC and have seen no necessity for a regular film censorship machinery.’¹⁸ However, material from the Public Records Office NI (PRONI) indicates that by 1917, the Home Office was already seeking ways to impose greater uniformity of decision-making in this fragile network of fledgling film censorship.

A 1923 letter to the Belfast Authority revealed that in 1917 the Home Office had drawn up a list of model conditions that local councils could follow when it came to the local censorship of films. The letter’s author complained ‘it appeared that the principal licensing authorities had adopted some of, if not all of the model conditions with or without slight modifications.’¹⁹ He continues:

The main difficulty of the present system is that there is still a certain want of uniformity in the action of licensing authorities throughout the country, and it sometimes happens that films which have been passed by the BBFC are rejected by some of the Licensing Authorities and there are instances on the other hand where films for which the Board have refused a certificate are allowed to be exhibited in certain parts of the country.²⁰

While the system of censorship set up via the London-based BBFC in 1912 was supposed to act as a buffer between the trade and audiences, here we see that only few years later, the Home Office has recognized that a single system of censorship for all of the UK is unlikely to be viable and has intervened to offer its

own guidelines. This challenges Robertson's notion that it was mainly large metropolitan authorities that were most likely to enforce their censorship powers; many of the local authorities in Northern Ireland were responsible for small communities with low populations and the run of correspondence directly refers to these smaller authorities as well as the larger urban councils. The letter concludes, 'it may not be possible to secure complete uniformity owing to the difference in local conditions [...] it is very desirable to secure uniformity of practice as far as possible.'²¹

This reference to 'the difference in local conditions' is a clear indication of how film censorship *could* work, with local authorities empowered to remove from the screen anything which their constituents might find disturbing or offensive. As the model conditions explicitly state:

No film shall be shown which is likely to be injurious to morality or to encourage or incite to crime, or to lead to disorder, or to be offensive to public feeling, or which contains any offensive representations of living persons. If the licensing authority serve a notice on the licensee that they object to the exhibition on any of the grounds aforesaid, that film shall not be shown.²²

While the initial powers may have emerged due to health and safety legislation and the need for local authorities to make sure exhibition spaces were safe and legally licensed, these forceful statements from 1917 (as well as subsequent additions) reveal that at this historical moment, it was accepted that councils could object to the exhibition of films which may be 'injurious to morality' 'encourage or incite crime' 'lead to disorder' or be 'offensive to public feeling'.²³ While the power of local authorities to act is clear, the way in which different authorities acted is less straightforward.

Later correspondence from 1923 notes the inclusion of two further conditions, both of which affirm the (informal) power of the BBFC and stipulate:

No film- other than photographs or current events – which has not been passed for 'universal' or 'public' exhibition by the British Board of Film Censors shall be exhibited without the express consent of the Council.

No film – other than photographs of current events – which has not been passed for universal exhibition by the British Board of Film Censors shall be exhibited on the premises without the express consent of the Council during the time that any child under, or appearing to be under, the age of 16 years old is therein.²⁴

The value of this archival material is undeniable, yet the reason for this detailed correspondence is political not cultural. The Home Office is spelling out the terms and conditions clearly so the newly created government of Northern Ireland can decide if they want to continue to abide by the existing system of UK censorship or will instead look to Republic for guidance on cinema censorship.²⁵ This exchange of views offers a fascinating insight into how the Home Office is keen to retain control of some parts of the process of film censorship. Working with the BBFC, who are becoming more actively involved in processes of pre-

censorship in this period, as revealed by Jeffrey Richards and James Robertson, the Home Office is here shaping the operation of local film censorship by encouraging local authorities to adopt the standard guidelines *but* interpret them in a way which makes sense locally.²⁶ Within this run of Northern Irish correspondence a delicate web of politics and policy emerges with the Home Office anxious to reassure the local authorities in the particular region that they retain the power to censor film for local patrons, while at the same time reminding them the broader system of censorship they adhere to is informed by a national view of what is acceptable, not a purely local one. Here again we see the intertwining of local autonomy with national oversight.

Mapping regionality

One of the key questions this work explores is whether Northern Ireland as a region is so very different from other parts of the UK due to its divided loyalties, wide-ranging political spectrum and variations in taste and in culture. John Hill points out that the history of film in Northern Ireland has been ‘interwoven with the histories of British and Irish cinema without fully belonging to either’ a further nod to the ambiguous position which Northern Ireland occupies politically and culturally.²⁷

The deep-seated divisions which cut across Northern Ireland can be seen in many aspects of politics and culture, yet this too fluctuates in different eras. Writing in 1998 when the multi-party talks which would lead to the Good Friday peace agreement were taking place, Colin Knox wrote hopefully that ‘councils, despite their relatively minor functions, are emerging as important cross community players.’²⁸ He cites the work of Lord Dubbs, recently appointed Labour Minister for Local Government for Northern Ireland who recommended that local councils be given ‘a power of general competence’ to do what they consider appropriate in the interests for the region and its people.²⁹ In this case, the connection between local councils and local people is being heralded as a way for effective decisions to be made that will resonate with rather than alienate different communities. Of course, other regions of the UK are less politically and socially extreme than Northern Ireland, but as Biltereyst, Meers and Van de Vijver indicate in their work on local audiences in the politically diverse city of Ghent, ‘the experience of cinemagoing was also related to geographical stratification and the feeling of belonging to a community or living in a particularly district.’³⁰ Once again extending these ideas explored in studies of cinemagoing to incorporate the localised policing of cinematic content, allow the same articulations of localised identity, belonging and community to emerge strongly.

One fascinating aspect of local censorship research is that certain locations and areas have been carefully explored, while others have been neglected. Often this relates to the availability and richness of local resources; some of the most detailed explorations usually relate to specific geographical regions which are densely populated and which have more cinemas. In 1931, the Home Office had noted that ‘the total number of picture houses in Northern Ireland is so small as to be hardly worth the Trade bothering about’ and that ‘there are for instance, a great many

more cinemas in either Birmingham or Manchester than in the whole of Northern Ireland, including Belfast.’³¹ Here again we see the preoccupations with densely populated urban centres rather than the smaller regions. One of the better mapped areas of film censorship activity is the sprawling conurbation of Greater Manchester which was formed in 1974 and encompassed ten metropolitan boroughs: Bolton, Bury, Oldham, Rochdale, Stockport, Tameside, Trafford, Wigan, and the cities of Manchester and Salford. The density of its population – estimated to be 2.8 million in 2017 – as well as the large number of cinemas within the region and the independence of the separate boroughs make it a useful case study. In addition to Hally’s work on Sale and Manchester in the 1960s, the inconsistencies caused by the different implementation of local censorship was highlighted by a series of discussions on local radio in the early 1980s. One of these recordings from 1982 declares that the variations across the Manchester area were so significant that, ‘it’s still a fact that if you live in Stockport or Rochdale, almost anything goes. While if you live in Bolton, you might as well stay home and watch television.’³² The programme then offers an example using the 1975 X-rated French sexploitation film *Emmanuelle*, noting:

8 of the districts, all except Rochdale and Stockport, were not content to leave things to the British Board of Film Censors. They all sent for written summaries of what the film was about, but there, any semblance of a common policy disappeared. Bolton banned it without even seeing it, Bury read the script and passed it. Manchester, Oldham and Thameside had a private screening and passed it, while Salford and Trafford both took one look and said no.³³

While effectively highlighting the farcical nature of film censorship within the greater Manchester area, the programme stops short of engaging with the issues that underpin the system and practice of local film censorship, specifically the ideas of localism and benevolent decision-making that drive and fuel local decisions about cinema. While it offers a tantalising insight into the varying prejudices and prudery at work in the various local authority areas, does such evidence really reveal that local tastes in Bolton are so much more sensitive or refined than those of audiences in Rochdale? Are the people of Trafford really much more inclined to disapprove of certain material than those in Oldham or Bury? And are the councils in these individual locations acting in the best interests of all of their citizens? Perhaps not. But it does indicate that in pursuing such different policies, individual councils were setting the tone of film culture in their specific regions and thus impacting and influencing local audience tastes. Additionally, and as Egan has shown in her work on regional responses to Monty Python’s *Life of Brian*, such decision-making frequently aligns with the ways in which local regions defined themselves.³⁴ Liberal or prudish, broad-minded or conservative, a local council’s idea of their own local area did influence how they responded to film culture and shaped and informed audience taste.

A further trend which emerges is the level of consultation which frequently took place when a council or committee were unsure how to proceed with a particular film or a related issue, such as nudity, language, sex or violence. Individual

councils reached out to consult, not just with the BBFC, but also to other councils. While Glasgow City Corporation queried decisions directly with the BBFC, other councils turned to those situated nearby. Rural Northern Irish council Ballyclare looked to nearby metropolitan Belfast for guidance on whether to permit a screening of *Frankenstein* (1931) to take place in the town in the 1930s, and then followed Belfast's lead in banning the film.³⁵ In other cases councils looked to those who possessed - or were perceived to possess - constituencies similar to their own. In 1971 Portsmouth City Council minutes noted that 'enquires made of other authorities to ascertain the action being taken by them with regard to the exhibition of X types of films.'³⁶ Portsmouth ultimately took Southend council as their model and began to match their decisions. Here we see the desire to match censorship activity to those sharing similar ideologies. It is interesting here that Portsmouth looked to Southend and not to the neighbouring councils of Southampton, Hampshire, Poole or Bournemouth, perhaps indicating that for some, geographical closeness was less significant than a closeness of ideology or perceived sense of identity.

Hally's work on Manchester highlights that while geographically close, Manchester and Sale councils were in different political worlds with Manchester council held by Labour from 1953-1967 while Sale council was 'overwhelmingly Conservative' for the same period.³⁷ The composition of different councils via the shifting sands of local politics, local issues and local personalities needs to be factored into any work on local censorship, as does the extent to which political allegiances extend into the realms of local culture. As Egan has shown in her explorations of Harrogate, Swansea and Dudley, political control of the council does not neatly align to a particular approach to censorship. Labour councils ban films just as readily as Conservative controlled councils Manchester is also one of the local authorities mentioned by Robertson as forging their own path on film censorship. He observes:

London was recognized as the foremost local authority and was often the harbinger for the other large urban authorities, although absolute homogeneity has never been a characteristic of metropolitan film censorship. In particular Manchester has over the years often adopted an independent line, while during the early sound years, Birmingham too went its own way.³⁸

Robertson's suggestion that the large metropolitan centres led the way in film censorship, certainly deserves consideration within the Northern Irish context. From the prosperous seaside town of Bangor, to the urban centre of Belfast, from heavily conservative Ballymena deep in the unionist heartland, to republican leaning Newry close to the Irish Border, Northern Ireland is defined less by its broad regionality and more by its localism. And in Northern Ireland the competing political ideologies of Unionism and Republicanism further complicate any kind of straightforward Conservative versus Liberal alignment. The archival evidence reveals that while Belfast is constantly referenced as a shaper and leader of taste, many of the smaller local councils had a keen sense of their own identity and their responsibility to their own communities.

Regulating the regions: Northern Irish council activity

As well as regional difference, the strength of religious feeling is an important factor which colours local politics and influences local behaviour. As Manning's work has shown, the remembered responses of audiences to the playing of the national anthem within cinemas, the screening of the film of the Coronation in 1953 or even newsreel depictions of UK government activity, often provoked responses which clearly revealed deeply held political, ideological or national allegiances. As Manning notes, 'one audience member from west Belfast recalled 'at the Capitol everybody would have stood for the national anthem'. Meanwhile, in 'Catholic areas, only a quarter of them would have stood and the others would have very pointedly pushed past them to get out'.³⁹

Unsurprisingly, Belfast and its film culture has been the area of Northern Ireland explored in most detail. The archival material related to the city in the late 1960s and early 1970s is particularly rich, indicating an active and enthusiastic film censorship committee keen to take decisions for local people. However, this disappears after 1974 perhaps as a direct result of the redrawing of borough and area boundaries under the local Government Act of 1972 and the subsequent changes to local government. It is also difficult to see to what extent other councils are following Belfast's lead in this period as the PRONI archives have revealed no information for the *same* historical period from other councils, notably Derry located in the west of the region.

One detail to emerge from scrutiny of the local and regional picture pertains to the locus of power. Echoing the arguments offered by Bowles and Moore about the relationship between local and metropolitan areas and their relationship to mass culture, it is clear that while the Home Office and the BBFC are stoutly defending the rights of local Northern Irish authorities to impose their own licensing conditions in the 1930s, they are simultaneously suggesting that smaller councils should look to larger metropolitan areas for guidance. The Northern Ireland office had sent copies of the Home Office model conditions to all local authorities in the region in early 1931 and some, including Armagh adopted them without question, but Down local authority wondered, 'how it is proposed that the conditions would be made effective in practice.'⁴⁰ To this Stormont replied:

It is recognised that a county council can hardly in practice exercise the same supervision on the matter as would be practical in the case of other licensing authorities, but it is thought that in practice very little supervision will be necessary in rural areas, as practically all films shown in such places have been previously exhibited in the large centres where close supervision is possible and will no doubt be provided.⁴¹

Despite having the autonomy to make decisions for local audiences, it is here suggested that cinemagoers in Down should be exposed to the same material as cinemagoers in Belfast and for the Down local authority to be led by metropolitan decision-makers. As the dominant urban centre in a region of less than 2 million people, Belfast is the obvious location to lead the way, yet such an approach diminishes the connection between local councils and local people and suggests a

universality of audience and taste which the work of Manning and others simply does not support.

Once again, religion also emerges as a key element in these debates, notably in the composition of local authorities and their subcommittees. One important example is predominantly Catholic Newry, in County Down situated close to the Irish border. The only entries for film in the catalogue of the local council minutes spanning 1916-1962 is from a meeting in 1947. During this period, Newry have a film censoring committee, though sadly there is very little record of their specific activity. The council minutes preserved within the archive include a full account of the meeting of the censoring committee in November 1947. At this point the composition of the committee leans heavily towards the ecclesiastical; of the 11 committee members, 6 are Protestant clergy, a circumstance which suggests the crossovers between civic and religious responsibility in the period within Newry, but also the low number of Catholics in public office. The meeting in November 1947 focused around a report which had appeared in the English paper the *Daily Mail* that the 'Newry, County Down Film Censoring committee have passed *The Outlaw* for showing in the town.'⁴² The minutes recorded that the Town Clerk refuted this claim and revealed that he had already arranged for a correction to run in both the *Daily Mail* and the *Belfast Telegraph* to the effect that the Howard Hughes film starring Jane Russell would not be screened in Newry.

A summary of what had actually happened regarding this film is contained in the minutes and reads:

The true facts of this case are as follows: three members of this committee had been invited, in their private capacity, by the proprietor of the Imperial cinema, Newry, to view the picture referred to above, which he proposed to show in his cinema, but which he had reason to believe might be of an objectionable nature. In view of the fact that he was unable to get in touch with the Acting Town Clerk for the purpose of requesting him to summon a full meeting of this Committee he had, in the circumstances, personally invited three members to a pre-view of this film, and after viewing assured him that they saw no objection to it being exhibited to the public.⁴³

The committee responses to this are unexpected; the comments recorded, mainly from committee members the Rev G Furniss, or the Very Rev P F McComiskey, are less concerned with *The Outlaw*, its content, its sexy star, its tone or its potential controversy, but rather that this cinema proprietor has dared to approach members of the committee *informally*. Such informal approaches were judged by the committee to be wildly inappropriate, and a motion was subsequently passed which stated 'members of this committee shall attend for the purposes of censoring films, only when summoned for such purpose by the Town Clerk or his deputy.'⁴⁴

Here we see that the objections being raised are about how due process is not being observed and cinema proprietors are attempting to work around the formal system. While indicative of a degree of rigidity and adherence to a particular way of working, it does suggest that the committee took its work seriously and were keen to avoid accusations of favouring certain individuals over others. What is also interesting is how quickly and effectively the council as a whole took steps to

contradict the report and to reprimand the cinema manager involved. There is certainly no suggestion that this particular council or committee looked to Belfast for guidance, preferring instead to make their own decisions.

Happily, the retention of material about *The Outlaw* has ensured that the full records of this film committee meeting remain in the formal council records and the other items discussed at the meeting are also included. These all fit within a pattern of local concerns, and note that, 'the committee gave careful consideration to the revision of the existing Special Conditions attaching to Licenses issues under the Cinematograph Act, 1909, and unanimously decided to recommend the Council, to adopt minor amendments to same, as well as the incorporation of new conditions.'⁴⁵ In addition to the general model conditions provided by the Home Office some years previously, the council decide to add the following conditions:

1. All advertising matter issued by a licensee should state the category in which each film so advertised has been placed by the British Board of Film Censors whether bearing "U", "A" or "H" certificate.
2. The earliest hour at which cinemas should open is 8.45pm and that no entertainment should commence before the hour of 9 O'clock pm.
3. No children, under 16 years of age, should be admitted in any circumstances, to the exhibition of films which commence on or after the hour of 9 O'clock, pm, on any night, including Sunday.

These further conditions set in place by Newry Council fit with many other council's actions, particularly regarding advertising needing to feature the BBFC categories. While the council minutes note that the meeting attendees were unsure how to enforce many of these additional conditions, the committee resolved to recommend to the council that the specials conditions be revised to include these further recommendations in cinema licenses.

Here the concerns are more about exhibition than content. A film like *The Outlaw* was unlikely to be shown in Newry anyway, so this is perhaps a case of an adventurous cinema proprietor pushing his luck. The people of Newry were denied the experience of this film but were also denied Sunday screenings when it was expected that people would be in church.

Turning from southerly Newry to the northern seaside town of Portrush where a selection of material hints at the attitude and approach of this council to film censorship. Minutes of a meeting from May 1956 include a note to set up a range of additional committees which would include a cinema film censors committee and comprise the chairman of the council and a further councillor.⁴⁶ A month later, an agenda item for the meeting of the main council is directly itemized as 'British Board of Film Censors'. However, the subsequent note added under the minutes for this agenda item simply records 'List of films passed in March/April. Note – all titles have been or are being attended to, or do not call for further consideration at present.'⁴⁷ Sadly, yet fairly predictably, the list of films was not included in the minutes, but the fact that the committee were happy to proceed with the films as agreed by the BBFC without intervention or even discussion suggests a sub-committee, and by extension a council happy to accept the rulings of the London-based organization. Again there is no evidence of a committee looking for a lead from Belfast.

Taken at face value, these two tiny entries, would suggest a hands-off approach to film culture with the council unwilling to become entangled with issues of film content. However, further detail from the council records from the period indicate that Portrush council *were* heavily engaged in discussions concerning film culture, but that their concerns related to how to use film to promote the town as a holiday destination, rather than to police the content in the town's cinemas. The resulting 1950s film about Portrush by a local filmmaker was part-funded by the Northern Irish tourist board and focused on colourful evocations of idyllic family holidays of donkey rides, pleasure gardens and the seaside, capitalizing on the attractions of the local area and created with the specific intention to draw people to the area and to promote the town in a very particular way.

Similar ideas about using film to promote the area emerge in the council minutes of the prosperous seaside town of Bangor, situated to the east of Belfast. In 1958, the council were actively discussing making a film to promote the area and set up a film sub-committee to take the idea forward. The only reference to controversial content in Bangor is from December 1957 when a renewed application is made from Orb Productions to screen the nudist film *Garden of Eden* in the town. This request was subsequently brought to the Finance and Law committee in January 1958 where it was firmly rejected. The council's decision to refuse the showing of a nudist film in the late 1950s is perhaps unsurprising when considering that the film in question was decidedly risqué and would certainly have provoked an outcry in conservative Bangor. These small-town notions of what is permissible and the council's sober and sombre tone is reinforced in the meeting notes which begin with a record of the prayer which opened every meeting, plus a lengthy list of condolences to the recently bereaved with a detailed listing of members of the community who have recently passed away.⁴⁸

Yet, in rejecting this film, Bangor is not asserting its own authority but rather supporting the position taken by the BBFC who also rejected the film outright. As Robertson documents, even the liberal-minded John Trevelyan who would guide the board through the murky shoals of the permissive 1960s and early 1970s considered the film to feature too much nudity and to be too sexually suggestive for any certificate, including the X.⁴⁹ Despite being rejected by the BBFC in January 1955, the production company decided to make use of the system of local censorship and wrote to all individual councils asking them to permit the film to be shown in their local areas. The London County Council broke ranks with the BBFC ruling and granted the film a U certificate in 1956 allowing the film to be seen by anyone including children. By the time the film was finally given an 'A' for Advisory by the BBFC in 1958, Robertson estimates that over 300 local authorities had already followed the London Council's lead and screened the film. Although concrete evidence is missing, it seems unlikely that conservative Bangor was one of these councils that permitted the nudist film to be shown in their jurisdiction. The question remains whether any other local authorities in Northern Ireland broke ranks and decided to screen it for their local patrons?

Moving away from the coast to the County Antrim local council located in the town of Ballymena, a long-term Protestant stronghold and the future constituency of the Reverend Ian Paisley. Here, material from 1970 relates to the specific and detailed amendments being made regarding exhibition of films in the local area.

This drive to amend the current cinema licenses comes from a cautious council solicitor who explains to the Secretary of the Council that he has recently scrutinised the text used and found it wanting. He notes:

The said license and conditions are, in my opinion, more in keeping with the days of the magic lantern than modern times. I am course, well-aware that no trouble has been experienced in County Antrim and I certainly do not want to be the means of introducing conditions which might indirectly, bring the council into dispute with cinema proprietors or film companies.⁵⁰

He suggests that the formal wording needs to be changed to make it clear that 'the council is conscious of its obligations to the cinema-going public' and that the current license wording does not match the requirements of the 1959 Cinematograph Act.⁵¹ He suggests that:

The 1959 Act for example, places a duty upon a licensing authority to impose conditions of restrictions prohibiting the admission of children to certain exhibitions. I need hardly add that the conditions currently used by the council do not contain any such provisions.⁵²

In drawing attention to the specific processes at work within local censorship, the county solicitor is attempting to head off any legal challenges which could result of the council intervening to restrict exhibition. By ensuring that the appropriate language is inserted into cinema licenses, the powers of the council to intervene are legalised. These amendments would also allow the council to make increasingly local decisions, secure in the knowledge that they, and they alone, are in charge of policing the content shown in their local area.

Again, period is important here; 1970 saw the revision of the BBFC categories and the raising of the X certificate from 16 and over to 18 and over. The 1960s had heralded films with higher levels of sexual and violent content and the years that followed would see troublesome cases such as *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) and *Last Tango in Paris* (1972) test the boundaries of taste and acceptability. The astuteness of this particular intervention at this historical moment indicates that this council employee is fully aware of the trouble that could erupt if the council were seen to be making illegal interventions into the screening of films in the Antrim area, and so has taken steps to clarify the process. He has also suggested that key individuals, specifically the county secretary, county surveyor, and county public health inspector or 'person or persons appointed by them [...] to act on their behalf' would be the enforcers of these conditions.⁵³ Such action reveals that whether or not Antrim council were keen to intervene in film censorship, or remained happy to take their lead from the BBFC or other local authorities, their legal autonomy to do so is secure.

Conclusions

This exploration of local council activity in Northern Ireland has suggested a number of important things. Firstly, it has shown how using council records to explore film regulation can be used, even when there is an absence of discussion of individual films. Well-kept council records provide clear evidence of decision making in

a particular period and how local film policy evolves within a specifically regional and local framework. Secondly, while it is hard to build a complete picture about local film censorship in Northern Ireland from the fragments of material available, what *can* be identified is that the historical policing of film culture in the region and over the years is disparate and uneven. Despite Hill's assertion that 'popular Protestantism in the North [of Ireland] fought for increased regulation of the cinema and censorship in order to preserve what it regarded as the special moral and political character of the Northern State', increased regulation did not manifest in a coherent or singular form and it is hard to discern Protestantism as the dominant force across the region.⁵⁴

Thirdly, in this single region – frequently homogenized yet religiously and politically diverse – individual local councils were making varied decisions on film-related matters of exhibition, of production, and of distribution for a variety of different reasons, contributing to a patchwork of decision-making similar to other parts of the UK. Fourthly, being cognizant of the level and extent of local difference and considering the different aspects of localism that emerge from the council records helps to highlight the different attitudes at work across the region. From the attention to due process in 1940s Newry to the adherence to the BBFC line on nudity in 1950s Bangor, to the tightening up of the legal framework in 1970s Ballymena, to the keen following by Ballyclare of the stance taken on the 1930s horror film by Belfast. All of this is part of a shifting regional picture which also incorporates the steadfast agreement with the BBFC in 1950s Portrush, and the fluctuating 1960s Belfast decisions which are heavily influenced by local activism and pressure from religious and social groups. Absences are also important here; the lack of council material from Derry limits the conclusions which can be drawn about the operation of the city authority in relation to film, yet newspaper reports reveal the screening of *Monty Python's Life of Brian*, a decision at odds with the decision made by Belfast council.⁵⁵

All of this indicates the complexity of the decision-making processes at work within local censorship and the particularly *local* concerns about exhibition, about controversial material, and about the potential for film to influence. As James Robertson reminds us, censorship of cinema is not fixed or finite. He argues:

British film censorship has always largely operated within contemporary political and social realities rather than external criteria. Censorship decisions can therefore never achieve permanence in Britain [...] once BBFC decisions for cuts or rejection have been taken they are not easily or speedily reversed even if the contemporary considerations giving rise to them no longer obtain.⁵⁶

While this may be the case when thinking about film censorship as a nationally enforced idea, the intricacies of localism that are at play in this process need to be fully acknowledged. In making decisions for local people, local councils in Northern Ireland were taking steps to ensure that it was they, not the BBFC who decided what was suitable for the people of the region. While this may have varied from council to council, the importance of locally elected officials making decisions for their own constituents reinforces the significance of local authority power in a

religiously and politically diverse region. The evidence suggests that while individual films can be identified as ‘unsuitable’ in particular areas, these concerns need to be placed in a much broader social and cultural context. It is less about the films than the ideological sensibilities of local decision makers and their constituents. In matters of censorship, local elected officials are setting the tone for cultural consumption by defining what is and what is not to be tolerated. Such actions reveal how film censorship manifests as a heavily local and idiosyncratic concept across Northern Ireland and one far beyond the remit and understanding of the BBFC.

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