“A horror picture at this time is a very hazardous undertaking”: Did British or American censorship end the 1930s horror cycle?

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Introduction

The massive success of Universal’s *Dracula* (Universal, 1931, dir. Tod Browning) and *Frankenstein* (Universal, 1931, dir. James Whale) launched a fashion for horror films. Over the first half of the 1930s, instead of petering out like many one-year cycles, horror became an increasingly stable niche market. However, in the spring of 1936, there was an abrupt hiatus in the horror cycle when, despite a number of recent successful horror films, Universal took horror productions off its schedule, and other studios followed. In autumn 1938, a phenomenally popular theatrical reissue of *Dracula* and *Frankenstein* as a double bill offered evidence of a continuing high public demand for horror. Universal almost immediately put another big budget *Frankenstein* sequel, *Son of Frankenstein*, on to its production schedule. This reawakened the interests of other studios in horror and horror-inflected films. Horror film production resumed, with greater quantities of films than ever before.

Modern scholarly accounts, such as those of Rhona Berenstein, David J. Skal and Edmund Bansak, tend to credit this abrupt break in an apparently profitable film cycle directly to an alleged 1935 ban on horror films in the United Kingdom. This explanation, although currently standard among horror scholars, is erroneous; based upon a fundamental misunderstanding about the nature and operations of 1930s British censorship: the British ‘ban’ on horror films never existed.

This article proposes that the most important factor in the film industry’s two year abandonment of horror was active campaigning and dissuasion of studios from horror production, on the part of the Production Code Administration (PCA), run by the Motion Picture Producers’ and Distributors’ Association (MPPDA). The evidence leads us to a rather more complex picture of the PCA’s regulation and censorship methods and their treatment of horror. It also provides us with an informative case study of the often complex power struggles and negotiations that went on ‘behind the scenes’ in 1930s film censorship.

Attention to British archival sources and to recent scholarly work on British film censorship thoroughly explodes the notion of any wholesale restriction of horror analogous to a ban. Although the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC), like the PCA, considered horror films problematic and wished to discourage them, British censorship of horror films never constituted a general ban. American scholars have also greatly overstated the restriction of access to horror films in the UK over this period.

Available British and American archival material connected to horror censorship suggests that direct pressure on studios from the Production Code Administration played a much greater role in the hiatus in the horror film cycle than trouble and loss of profit from British censorship itself. The PCA, who interpreted the complex, decentralised and often confusing British censorship process for Hollywood studios, talked up and simplified British censorship organisations’ dealings with horror films, to the point of suggesting to studios that the BBFC had instituted a ‘ban’ upon horror films. The PCA were at this time openly discouraging studios from making horror films as part of their attempt to guide studios towards ‘inoffensive’ types of filmmaking. They used this threatening picture of a British horror ban as a

key part of their argument. Several studios which attempted to put horror films onto their production schedules between 1936 and 1938 were dissuaded from doing so by harshly worded advice from the PCA.

Horror as product in 1935-36

Classical Hollywood film cycles were often brief trends lasting for one or two waves of production. Horror, however, appeared to shift towards a niche market. Both trade reviews and box office reports from 1935 and 1936 see the market for horror films as stable rather than declining – quite a contrast from their expectation in 1932-3 that the horror cycle was a brief fad. For instance, the *New York Times* review of *The Walking Dead* (Warner, 1936, dir. Michael Curtiz), in March 1936, remarked that "horror pictures are a staple commodity, and this one was taken from one of the better shelves." In May 1936 *Hollywood Reporter* said of *Dracula's Daughter* (Universal, 1936, dir. Lambert Hillyer): "With the stout box office of "Dracula", "Frankenstein" and the other chillers on Universal's list a matter of record, it is a safe bet that this latest one will make money." *Variety* said of the same film: "Rates tops among recent horror pictures and, as such, figures to deliver nice grosses. […] sufficiently shocking for the horror-pic fans." Other typical comments were "should give the "horror" fans all they want" (*Motion Picture Herald* on *Mark of the Vampire*), "audiences liking horror should go for this" (*Motion Picture Daily* on *Mad Love*), and: "If your customers like horrors, they will find what they want here […] Karloff and Bela Lugosi should mean much in bringing in your shocker fans" (*Film Daily* on *The Raven*).(1)

The domestic performance of horror films released in 1935 and 1936 were correspondingly above average. *Bride of Frankenstein* (Universal, 1935, dir. James Whale), released May 1935, became one of the cycle's greatest box office successes. In Los Angeles *Bride*'s opening week gave the Pantages Theatre "one of biggest weeks it has had in its career." Around the country, the film did similarly magnificent business. On Broadway, it broke attendance records at the Roxy, "so far outdistancing everything else there is no comparison."(2) Whether because of or despite *Bride*'s performance, the glut of horror films which arrived, one after another, in the cinemas in the spring and summer of 1935 nearly all managed to do very good box office without overcrowding the market. *Mark of the Vampire* (MGM, 1934, dir. Tod Browning) did good, solid business around the country, running for two weeks on Broadway, in Minneapolis and in Los Angeles. It was enough of a success for MGM to give Tod Browning the director's chair on the higher-budget *The Devil Doll* (MGM, 1936, dir. Tod Browning). *Werewolf of London* (Universal, 1935, dir. Stuart Walker), too, was "great with kids" in LA, running for two weeks, and also did consistently well around the country. *The Raven* (Universal, 1935, dir. Lew Landers) was held over in Minneapolis and did decent program business, while *The Black Room* (Columbia, 1934, dir. Roy William Neill) did above average business in Los Angeles and Minneapolis.(3) Onl*y Mad Lov*e (MGM, 1935, dir. Karl Freund), released at the tail end of this string of horrors, made an overall loss.(4) Another independent horror film, *Condemned to Live* (*Invincible*, 1935, dir. Frank R. Strayer), was released in October, and Republic's *The Crime of Dr. Cres*pi (John H. Auer, 1935, dir. John H. Auer) in January 1936. The latter did well on Broadway despite its low budget and some rather harsh reviews.(5)

While the horror films released in 1936 were, in the broad sweep, not as profitable, they still did decent business. Several lower budget films - *The Invisible Ray* (Universal, 1935, dir. Edmund Grainger), *The Walking Dead* and the independent Halperin brothers' production *Revolt of the Zombies* (United Artists, 1936, dir. Victor Halperin) did business varying from excellent to struggling depending on the city. Meanwhile, the bigger-budget films *Dracula's Daughter* and *The Devil Doll* enjoyed far better receipts. *Dracula's Daughter* ran for two weeks on Broadway, making "a happy figure", and enjoyed solid success, with particularly excellent business in Chicago, San Francisco, and Minneapolis.(6) *The Devil Doll* was a

less notable success, but still ended up $68,000 in profit, and was Tod Browning's most successful film for years.(7)

Box office reports from 1935-1936 quite frequently mention the reliable popularity of horror at particular theatres and in particular towns. For instance, *Werewolf of London* in Portland, in June 1935, was taken to be "getting a play on mystic horror angle which has ducat sales value in these parts."(8) *Variety*'s Chicago reporter similarly explained *The Invisible Ray*'s success at the State-Lake in July 1935 by saying that "Boris Karloff is always a magnet in this house," and commented of *The Raven*'s good business at the same house in April 1936, horror "is caviar for this audience."(9) Of *Dracula's Daughter*'s success in San Francisco in June 1936, the reporter commented that "films of the horror type always go well in Frisco", and similarly of a Cleveland theatre the same week, "this spot has regular clientele of thrill-seekers."(10) Interestingly, none of this available data on the box office performance of horror films in 1936 gives any hint of the upcoming cessation of horror production.

Tellingly, in 1935 and 1936, studios used opportunistic horror angles to market numerous films not primarily received as horror. In January 1935, *The Man Who Reclaimed His Head* (Universal, 1934, dir. Edward Ludwig), a drama about war profiteering, was marketed with a horror-angled campaign. For instance one poster evokes horror indirectly but thoroughly, being dominated by a giant skull, while in the background a man lit from below cowers in the grip of the hand of a shrivelled corpse. The tagline proclaims "Accused – of the world's most monstrous crime!"(11) *Variety* disputed the angle, however, opening its review by stating "This isn't a horror picture, as the title and memory of [Claude] Rains in other films might suggest."(12) In 1936, one poster for the medical drama *The Story of Louis Pasteur* (Warner, 1935, dir. William Dieterle) uses a similar indirect evocation of horror, selling the film as a *Jekyll and Hyde* story with two contrasting pictures of Paul Muni – one handsome and clean shaven, the other bearded, glowering and lit from below – and the tagline "Was he hero … or monster?"(13) If studios used horror angles to widen the appeal of films not generally identified as horror, it suggests strongly that the trade still considered horror marketable.

The 1930s censorship struggle

During the first half of the 1930s, there was increasing tension between the concerns of censorship campaigners and the film industry's reliance on sensation, taboo and controversy as an effective way of marketing films and drawing box office in the hostile economic climate of the Depression. Controversy usually boosted the profitability of individual films, making them more likely to feed into a cycle – but that same controversy would provide the censorship lobby with "evidence of the industry's lack of social responsibility."(14) Richard Maltby argues that "the industry's predilection for the crude but reliable market mechanism of rushing imitations of profitable pictures into production, generating seasonal cycles" exacerbated this conflict.(15) Given the short-term promotional effects such controversy could have, the presence of a number of controversial cycles, such as the gangster cycle and 'kept woman' cycle, besides the horror cycle, is not surprising. Ruth Vasey states that "moral insecurity" caused by the Depression was responsible for much of the industry's public-relations crisis.(16) Indeed, the 1930s saw a rise in moral conservatism within American culture in general.(17) Conservative commentators frequently made permissiveness and moral decadence the scapegoats for the 1929 Wall Street Crash and the cultural and economic crisis of the Depression.

The Production Code of 1930 was the cornerstone of a broader strategic response by the Hollywood film industry to increasing controversy and censorship activism. Through it, the MPPDA aimed to encourage films and production trends which showed the industry in a good light, and to discourage the controversial

and sensational. Thus, it aimed to integrate censorship "within the larger institution of cinema production, distribution and exhibition" and thereby to permanently answer those pressure groups who called for federal censorship.(18) It took some years to integrate Code regulation fully into production, and for the first half of the 1930s, the censorship debate was defined by the struggle between different censorship organisations and pressure groups, and particularly between the industry's internal Production Code censorship and independent and local groups.

This was also in part a struggle over broader issues of cultural power, concerning, in Maltby's words, "who possessed the appropriate authority to police the ideological apparatus of representation."(19) The rise in film censorship activism also coincided with a decline in the censorship of more established art forms such as the novel, the theatre and magazines, especially on the part of the Catholic Church, as Ruth Vasey has usefully charted.(20) This was an argument which frequently incorporated concerns regarding class and cultural power like those cited above, and specifically regarding the regulation of working class social behaviour through leisure. The Production Code, attempting to synthesise such concerns, argues that while most arts appeal only to the "mature", and have "[their] grades for different classes", cinema "at once reaches every class of society".(21) Moreover, different cultural groups competing for wider social influence took an interest in the censorship campaign, as we see, for instance in the competition between the Catholic Legion of Decency and the Protestant Motion Picture Research Council over movie reform.(22)

Explaining the horror hiatus: existing scholarly accounts

Earlier accounts of horror cinema which do not emphasise film cycles, but treat horror cinema as having a continuous and largely linear history, have understandably therefore given less attention to the historical details of a censorship-led horror hiatus. For instance, Brunas *et al*'s *Universal Horrors* merely notes in one line that "an outright ban on horror movies imposed by the British Commonwealth" led to a hiatus.(23)

More recent accounts tend to give the hiatus rather more space and interest, since they devote more attention to censorship in general, have more access to archival material, and give a greater emphasis on film cycles as the means through which cinematic trends ebbed and flowed. Edmund Bansak's account of the role of censorship in the horror cycle's demise is fairly representative. He writes that:

Universal's *The Raven* (1935) […] signalled the sudden end to the horror craze. Because of its torture theme, which incited considerable outrage in England, *The Raven* initiated a virtual ban on all horror films shown in the British Isles. […] The British market was vital to the Laemmles. The insistence of the British Board of Film Censors upon rating horror films with an "H" certificate was the kiss of death to Universal's horror exports. The studio's resulting losses could not have been much worse if horror films had been banned outright.(24)

This explanation attributes the two year hiatus in horror production, from 1936 to 1938, to several factors. Firstly, it mentions that a British "virtual ban" upon horror films, via the "H" certificate, severely reduced the British market and seriously impeded the cycle's box office takings. Secondly, it states that this led to Universal's collapse, with the implication that, given the fact that they were market leaders in horror production, an end to their production of horror would result in an end to the cycle more generally.

Other scholars tend to concur, including the writers of the two most currently standard historical accounts of 1930s horror cycle. David J. Skal attributes the hiatus straightforwardly to "overseas censorship

concerns", and specifically to the 1935 British horror ban.(25) Skal does not deal in much detail with the hiatus in horror production from 1936 to 1938. However, he does report that a British ban on passing horror films was in operation from 1935, after the release of *The Raven*, and claims *Dracula's Daughter* was therefore aimed at the domestic market alone. In fact, *Dracula's Daughter* was passed in Britain with an 'A' certificate which meant that under-sixteens could only see it with a parent or guardian.(26) As Sarah J. Smith points out, the 'A' certificate was loosely enforced at best, and did little in practice to restrict children's access to films. The BBFC may well have understood this: the following year, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* (Disney, 1937, dir. David Hand) was also given an 'A' certificate.(27)

Rhona Berenstein, taking the details of her historical account from Skal, cites "the increasing resistance of foreign censors to accepting horror films":

Another factor contributing to the end of the horror cycle was. Britain, a popular market for Hollywood motion pictures, was a significant case. The British Board of Film Censors was approving fewer horror movies each year […] 1934 domestic and foreign censorship boards … were far more ruthless than their predecessors. Breen's more enthusiastic enforcement of the industry's Production Code […] was combined with growing international disdain for horror […] This trend was accompanied by an upsurge in domestic commitment to high-budget prestige pictures. The result was a decrease in horror's popularity, particularly in terms of studio rosters for big-money productions.(28)

This account follows Skal's, and like his and Bansak's, is founded upon numerous factual errors. Berenstein suggests that the BBFC were banning an increasing number of horror films from exhibition over the period 1931-1936. In fact, *Freaks* (MGM, 1932, dir. Tod Browning) and *The Monster Walks* (Action, 1932, dir. Frank Strayer) were banned in 1932, *Island of Lost Souls* (Paramount, 1932, dir. Erle C. Kenton) in 1933, *Black Moon* (Columbia, 1934, dir. Roy William Neill) in 1934, and the independent *The Crime of Dr Crespi* in 1935. No horror films at all were banned in the UK from 1936 to 1942.(29)

There was no rise in the number of horror films refused a certificate, far fewer films were banned than Berenstein's narrative implies, and all the banned films apart from *Island of Lost Souls* and *Freaks* were obscure low-budget films from small studios. None of Universal's films – the lynchpin of the horror cycle – were banned. Berenstein may be referring to BBFC use of the 'H' label over the period 1933-1935: it was awarded to five films in 1933, another five in 1934, and six in 1935.(30) As I will discuss in greater detail below, although scholars commonly identify the 'H' label with a ban, in fact it was a purely advisory label which did *not* restrict children's or adults' access to horror films, either in theory or in practice.

The Sale of Universal and the Cessation of its Horror Production

Available information on the sale of Universal Studios in 1935 contradicts Edmund Bansak's assertion that a 1935 British ban on horror films was primarily responsible for Universal's collapse. While horror itself remained consistently profitable, Universal made an overall loss in the Depression years of 1932, 1933 and 1935. Important as horror was to Universal, the length of the period of financial difficulty suggests that other long-term factors were the cause. In fact, the aging Laemmle had been turning down offers to sell up since 1929, and rumours and reports about Universal's sale regularly surfaced throughout the 1930s. Towards the end of 1935, a successful deal became public knowledge. J. Cheever Cowdin of Standard Capital, a New York-based syndicate who specialised in bailing out troubled companies, in

partnership with Charles R. Rogers, an associate producer at Paramount, finally bought 80% of Universal's stock on March 13, 1936. Rogers was now functionally the head of the studio.(31)

Horror had been a 1930s staple of Laemmle's Universal, but the new Universal management seemed far more receptive to the PCA's warnings concerning the censorship drawbacks of the cycle. On June 17 1936, Rogers announced in the *Los Angeles Daily News* that "Universal this year will go in for less tense drama and so-called 'horror' pictures, and make more pictures to amuse and enthuse audiences." (32) James Curtis, in his filmic biography *James Whale*, suggests that Rogers "took note of the increased hostility such product engendered abroad."(33)

However, the takeover of Universal, while perhaps an influencing factor in the end of the cycle, cannot alone fully account for its ending. While Universal produced far more horror films than any other single studio, throughout the cycle Paramount, Warner Bros. and MGM produced horror films. More than half of the cycle overall was the product of other studios, including several horror films released in 1936: *The Walking Dead* (Warner), *The Devil Doll* (MGM), *The Crime of Dr. Crespi* and *Revolt of the Zombies* (both independent).

In fact, examining the sale of Universal leads us to the question of why the new management chose to end one of its more profitable and well-known lines of product, and why the rest of the film industry might have followed this trend and taken horror films off their own production schedules. So an examination of Universal's sale returns us to the original question of whether censorship demands ended horror production, and if so, how this came about.

Historical evidence of a British 'ban' on horror

Those accounts of 1930s horror production which attribute its end to British censorship often cite reports within the Hollywood trade press at the time. David J. Skal bases his account of the British ban primarily on an Associated Press article of August 23rd, 1935, reprinted widely in the American local press. This article announced: "'Horror'" Films Taboo in Britain; 'The Raven' Last." J. Brooke Wilkinson, secretary of the British Board of Film Censors, is reported in the article as saying that the film would be the last horror film passed by the board. Wilkinson's warning followed a comment from Edward Short, President of the board, that such films were "unfortunate and undesirable". Wilkinson is reported as ascribing his own comments and Short's to the fact that they knew "that similar productions were being planned in Hollywood," and they felt need to give notice that future horrors would be judged "more strictly". Wilkinson added that "If this notice is disregarded, the producers must take the consequences."(34) The other accounts of the British ban I have mentioned appear to depend as much as Skal's own account as on this article. Rhona Berenstein takes her account from Skal, while the Edmund Bansak passage quoted earlier seems to suggest that like Skal, he draws his account from the same article.(35)

An article from *Variety* on May 6th, 1936, nearly a year later, appears to support the narrative of the Associated Press article. Here *Variety* reported the decision of Universal's new management to cease production of horror films, and cited British censor hostility:

Reason attributed by U. for abandonment of horror cycle is that European countries, especially England, are prejudiced against this type product. Despite heavy local consumption of its chillers, U. is taking heed to warning from abroad.
[…]

Studio's London rep has cautioned production exec to scrutinize carefully all so-called chiller productions, to avoid any possible conflict with British censorship.(36)

These reports claim in clear and definitive terms that the British Board of Film Classification intended to pass no more horror films in 1935, and that this in turn influenced Universal to abandon horror production. It is certainly the case, as Bansak claims, that the British market was an important one for the major studios, constituting, according to Ruth Vasey, more than 30% of its total foreign income.(37)

However, a comparison of the claims of the PCA and two brief newspaper articles about this 'ban', the three sources which underpin so many accounts of it, with actual available data on British censorship shows that they were both overplaying the severity of the situation and oversimplifying the complex and decentralised British censorship situation. In short, the British 'horror ban' never existed.

British horror censorship and the 'H' certificate

One major reason why so many historical accounts of the horror cycle rely on the PCA's explanation of the British 'ban' is practical. Skal and Berenstein are both US-based scholars and rely on American archival sources for accounts of the British censorship situation. Moreover the majority of the BBFC's own 1930s records are not extant, thanks to the bombing of their London offices during the Second World War. However, much information still exists, especially given that British censorship primarily took place at the local government level during the 1930s. James C. Robinson has done informative work with surviving records and sources in two books: *The British Board of Film Censors: Film Censorship in Britain, 1896-1950* (London: Croom Helm, 1985) and *Hidden Cinema: British film censorship in action 1913-75* (London: Routledge, 1993). More recently, Sarah J. Smith's 2005 *Children, Cinema and Censorship* has also made use of this archival material to provide a much fuller account of the 'H' certificate and British horror censorship in the 1930s than has previously been available. Smith's work in particular substantially modifies the more usual accounts of British horror censorship in the 1930s.

British film censorship of the 1930s, like American film censorship of the 1930s, was decentralised and complex, taking place in different forms across numerous sites: "within the BBFC, within the production companies themselves, at the local authorities, and from extra-parliamentary critics and would-be censorship reformers."(38) The BBFC granted certificates for exhibition, local authorities could additionally ban a film (although they rarely did so), and critics and campaigners created negative publicity for the film industry. The BBFC granted two kinds of certificate: A and U. While U films were supposed to be particularly suitable for children, those under fourteen could attend an A film in the company of an adult.(39) The BBFC, moreover, had no legal status: local authorities could and sometimes did choose to show a film to which the BBFC had refused a certificate.(40) The PCA therefore had a valuable interpretative function for Hollywood film studios, parsing and simplifying British censorship for them.

As I mentioned above, the 'H' certificate, as it was introduced in May 1933 – two years before *The Raven* – and moreover, as James C. Robertson and Sarah J. Smith explain in detail, was a purely advisory classification which allowed horror films to be passed with a warning, without further cutting or precautionary banning.(41) Smith argues that it is more accurate to refer to it as the "Horrific label", as it was not a certificate as such and "therefore did nothing to stop unaccompanied A film attendance by young people." She goes on to explain that the 'H' certificate was a compromise measure introduced after campaigning by the NSPCC, the Order of the Child and some other bodies which lobbied for children to

be banned from admission to horror films. Indeed, she suggests that on the contrary, the Horrific label may have actively enticed the custom of children to "the forbidden fruit of 'unsuitable' films".(42)

The A certificate did not restrict attendance and profits in the quite the same way that might be true today of a 15 or 18 certificate in the UK, or an R or NC-17 in the USA. Smith documents the huge popularity of horror with children through extensive interviews with respondents who attended horror and other films in the 1930s. She notes the widespread practice of children getting strangers to 'accompany' them into horror and other A certificate films. She even notes that Scottish children's matinees routinely showed both films with the Horrific label and other controversial A certificate films like *The Story of Temple Drake* (Paramount, 1933, dir. Stephen Roberts).(43)

British regional censorship of horror films was only sporadically stricter than this. More importantly, British local censorship of horror films was oriented almost entirely at preventing children from attending, rather than banning films altogether. Smith reports only two such bans: Birmingham and St. Helens banned children from attending *King Kong* in September 1933 and in December 1935, Middlesex, Surrey and Essex – three of the thirty-nine English counties – all instituted a more comprehensive prohibition against children attending any film that they themselves deemed horrific, regardless of BBFC classification.(44)

Moreover, while the BBFC may have claimed to be hostile to all horror films, a survey of their treatment of individual films shows that their treatment of horror films was variable and inconsistent, analogous to neither PCA nor studio marketing classifications of horror. It also shows no evidence of a shift around 1935 to a stricter policy, as announced by both the Associated Press article and the PCA themselves. Throughout the 1930s, the BBFC passed some horror films uncut but bearing a Horrific label, while others were passed with an unlabelled 'A' certificate but with cuts. Which of these policies was applied a film bears no immediately obvious relation to its content or to its marketing, and James C. Robertson has suggested that this inconsistent policy "[reflected] rather a mixture of confusion and possible fear of an adverse Film Censorship Consultative Committee reaction at the BBFC".(45) *The Mummy* (Universal, 1932, dir. Karl Freund) was passed uncut with an 'A' certificate alone, while *The Vampire Bat* (Majestic, 1933, dir. Frank R. Strayer) was cut by 99 feet and still given a Horrific label. *Bride of Frankenstein*, *Mad Love*, *Mark of the Vampire*, and *Werewolf of London* all received the Horrific label.(46) Most importantly, the alleged stricter attitude following *The Raven* never really appeared: BBFC treatment of horror films after this date is merely consistent with their established policy. *The Walking Dead* was passed in April 1936 with an unlabelled 'A' certificate and a cut of 100 feet, while *The Devil Doll* received a Horrific label.(47) *Dracula's Daughter* was passed uncut with an 'A' certificate.(48) The Horrific label was neither applied to all films marketed as horror nor applied only to horror films – and it did little to nothing to restrict the circulation of a film.

In July 1935 the London County Council proposed a nationwide ban to the Film Censorship Consultative Committee and the Home Office on children attending Horrific label films. However, no real changes were made at the national level until June 1937, after the cycle's end, when the Horrific label was replaced with a formal H certificate, a third certificate in addition to A and U, which finally banned the attendance of children under sixteen.(49)

After 1935, the BBFC banned only two horror films outright, both 1942 Poverty Row films: *The Corpse Vanishes* (Monogram, 1942, dir. Wallace Fox) and *The Mad Monster* (PRC, 1942, dir. Sam Newfield). The 1937 'H' certificate was used liberally in 1939, on eleven films, but thereafter on only two films

between 1940 and 1944, despite the many horror films produced and given UK releases over that period.(50)

The PCA and the British 'ban'

As Richard Maltby argues, the PCA, in keeping with the broader aims of the Production Code, were interested in discouraging consistently problematic cycles and encouraging 'good' ones.(51) Studios, on the other hand, were interested in minimising local censorship while conserving as much box office potential as possible. Controversial cycles which remained profitable were still attractive to studios, particularly in the case of a cycle like horror where a moderate degree of controversy could even increase box office performance. Maltby comments that "when such cycles provoked controversy, the takings of individual movies were undoubtedly increased, but they provided the reform lobby with evidence of the industry's lack of social responsibility."(52) While the good health of the film industry was in the interest of both parties, the PCA were prepared to have individual films and cycles make a loss in order to preserve the film industry's longer-term interests as conceived by the MPPDA and the Code.

I would argue that the PCA approached horror films in 1936 with a two-pronged attack. They simultaneously sternly warned producers that horror films *per se* were unworkably problematic, more trouble than they were worth, and 'proved' this by objecting to every element they felt might result in affective reactions of horror and miring films in long and troublesome negotiations. In this they were much helped by the notion of Great Britain's supposed ban on horror films via the 'H' certificate. The PCA routinely alluded to this 'ban' as proof that horror films were bad news for the industry, despite being in direct communication with the British Board of Film Censors and therefore presumably having easy access to the real facts of the case.

In 1935 and 1936, the PCA issued increasingly harsh warnings to studios submitting horror scenarios, placing emphasis on the notion of this BBFC 'ban'. The BBFC's position was one of the PCA's most important pieces of evidence that horror was such a "precarious undertaking". By September 1935, the PCA were making their policy on horror clear from their first communications with producers. Writing to Warner in September 1935, after a discussion of a treatment of *The Walking Dead*, Breen appeared to be verging on attempts to completely dissuade the studio from making it:

Horror stories of all kinds are a precarious undertaking in these days, especially with respect to their likely reception at the hands of political censor boards. I think you know that the British Board in London has indicated a disposition not to approve out-and-out horror stories; and a number of boards in this country, and in Canada, have already demonstrated their dislike for this type of story by mutilating a number of "horror pictures" which have been released in recent months.(53)

The warning about the British censor board's disposition was repeated again almost word for word in a December 1935 letter in response to a redrafted script of the film.(54) Likewise, Universal was repeatedly warned in correspondence over *Dracula's Daughter* "that the making of a horror picture at this time is a very hazardous undertaking from the standpoint of political censorship generally."(55)

Such warnings painted as bleak a picture as possible of local censorship prospects. The PCA, in correspondence dealing with the cycle's final films, did their best to persuade producers and studios not to make more horror films, and to remove all horror content from films in development. Any element understood to cause a reaction of horror was to be excised, and the differences between acceptability under the Code and to "political censor boards" was no longer quibbled over, or even mentioned. In fact,

the plots of the final three films in the cycle, *The Walking Dead*, *The Devil Doll* and *Dracula's Daughter* were all substantially remodelled after the PCA made it clear that the original narrative was in itself unacceptable.

The script of *Dracula's Daughter* was rejected outright by the PCA in its initial form. A PCA memo notes that the original script contained "countless offensive stuff which makes the picture utterly impossible for approval under the Production Code", and in particular "a very objectionable mixture of sex and horror". After Carl Laemmle Jr. and Breen talked about it personally in conference, the former agreed to a complete rewrite.(56) However, when the rewritten script was submitted and another conference meeting held on 23rd October to discuss it, the PCA requested another complete revision of the script, still unhappy with the "combination of sex and horror". The list of changes required to the rewritten script runs for six pages. By now it was mid-January, and Universal planned to start shooting on the 23rd. The makers of *Dracula's Daughter* had the daunting task of completely re-plotting and writing the film in line with censorship requirements just before the now delayed shoot. In fact, rewrites continued almost all through the production period, sent daily, page by page, to the PCA for approval. The new script, which, the PCA granted, seemed "to meet the basic requirement of the Code"(57), had an entirely new plot which contained no explicit gruesomeness at all. Still, the PCA cautioned Universal "with regard to the necessity for care in avoiding any unduly gruesome shots in your picture" – an intensification of their former policy.(58)

The Walking Dead underwent similar, extensive rewriting at the behest of the PCA. After viewing a treatment and meeting with the producer, Breen warned Warner to "exercise the utmost care" in toning down those potentially horrific aspects of the film "which are likely to give serious offense."(59) The removal of explicit detail from both the revival of the dead and the murders, which make up the bulk of the action, necessitated that the studio rewrite the story entirely. Over the course of several rewrites, the PCA repeatedly asked for the script to be further toned down, concentrating their attention on the revival of the dead, the murders, and the appearance of Karloff's character, which must not "overdo the gruesomeness."(60)

The Devil Doll, the last of the 1930s horror cycle, began its existence in the early months of 1935, as an adaptation of the 1934 novel *Burn Witch Burn* by A. Merritt, intended firmly as a horror film. However, after lengthy and convoluted negotiations with the PCA at every stage of its making, it was finally released as a film marginal to the cycle, with studio marketing advising strongly against its promotion as a horror film. The plot of *The Devil Doll*, like those of *The Walking Dead* and *Dracula's Daughter* before it, underwent substantial PCA-led changes, which continued into the production period, and even after shooting had ended.(61)

Unsurprisingly after such comprehensive alteration, all the final films of the cycle had relatively minor local censorship difficulties. *The Walking Dead* and *The Devil Doll* were approved uncut throughout the US. Quebec and Britain made some cuts to *The Walking Dead* but passed it, and both also passed *The Devil Doll* with minor cuts. *Dracula's Daughter* was approved in most states; Maryland, Ohio, and Ontario all cut a single, sexually suggestive line, and the latter also excised the Countess' "frightening" of Lili. It passed in Britain. (62)

The PCA's treatment of all three of these 1936 films follows the same pattern, suggesting a consistent policy on horror: the warning directing the studio not to make a horror film, followed by firm requests for a comprehensive remodelling of the film's plot and content. This policy militated against horror in several ways. The policy had an arguably deliberate filibustering effect, making production of a horror film

contingent on time-consuming and obstructive negotiations and renegotiations over every aspect of production, from script to make-up, It also resulted in final films that differed notably in content from the rest of the cycle.

All three films began as relatively typical horror cycle entries but changed almost beyond recognition between initial plot outline and finished film. There is some evidence that PCA negotiations over these films even attempted to achieve a shift in genre. Originally conceived as a horror film, *The Devil Doll* was eventually marketed as a fantasy and novelty film. The studio press manual advised exhibitors: "IT IS NOT A HORROR PICTURE … in any sense of the word. It is a thriller, a melodrama, a punch, sock, dynamic story that is real entertainment … but most of all it has novelty … " (63)

The available evidence suggests that the PCA took advantage of the importance of the British market and the complexity and murkiness of its censorship situation, in order to use an alleged British 'ban' as leverage in their argument. The PCA's mediating correspondence with studios concerning the BBFC appears to have had an important interpretative function in explaining the more obscure and localised aspects of British censorship. Indeed, as Ruth Vasey has chronicled, part of the PCA's remit was to relay to studios difficulties with specific international markets. (64)

We should pay more scholarly attention to this hiatus period, particularly in light of the fact that the hiatus was not due to a complete studio abandonment of attempts at horror production. The hiatus dissolved when the autumn 1938 *Dracula/Frankenstein* double bill suggested to Universal that great profit could be had from a new *Frankenstein* sequel. The PCA's lively attempts to discourage them with tales of British opposition had little effect. The hiatus in production of new horror films continued only so long as the PCA could discourage studios' proposals for more horror films.

In April 1936, less than two weeks before the *Variety* report announcing the end of horror production, Universal sent the PCA the synopsis of a proposed horror film, *The Human Robot* - eventually filmed as *Man Made Monster* (Universal, 1941, dir. George Waggner) - and the PCA responded with a particularly strongly-worded warning. They stated, "[British] opposition to this kind of screen entertainment suggests that the making of a horror picture is a somewhat hazardous undertaking, from the standpoint of its general release."(65) Breen further suggested that Universal carefully consult their Foreign Department "before embarking on the actual production of this picture".(66) In the event, Universal shelved production of *The Human Robot*, and horror in general, less than weeks later.

In 1937, the PCA's archives appear to show no attempts by any studio to put a horror film into production. Columbia, in September 1938, also began developing a horror film, *The Man They Could Not Hang* (Columbia, 1939, dir. Nick Grinde). Columbia's treatment for *The Man They Could Not Hang* was met by the PCA with a firm line. The PCA informed the studio flatly that the story was "not acceptable under the provisions of the Production Code" because of "the excessive number of gruesome and brutal killings." They added their now customary statement that the "political censorship" difficulties of such a film could be gauged by the fact that British censors were likely to reject it "as falling into the horror category." After a conference, Columbia agreed to develop the film "as a murder mystery rather than a horror story," with gruesomeness minimised and killings left largely off-screen.(67)

In March 1938, Universal made enquiry informally to the PCA about the Code certificate prospects of a sequel to *The Invisible Man* (Universal, 1933, dir. James Whale). The studio received a carefully-worded warning in response, advising the studio to go ahead on the understanding "that it is your purpose not to make a, so-called, "horror picture", or to deal with subjects which are forbidden under the Code as

excessively brutal or gruesome […] [but] to play the story for broad comedy and with trick photography.(68) The story was shelved for over a year, and a full treatment was not sent to the PCA until June 1939, six months after the release of *Son of Frankenstein.* By that point, perhaps emboldened or encouraged by *Son*'s profitability, *The Invisible Man Returns* (Universal, 1940, dir. Joe May) was more clearly a horror film once more, the elements of comedy were de-emphasised, and the treatment received numerous PCA cautions on gruesomeness, revenge, blood, and strangulation scenes.(69) They still warned Universal to bear in mind "the extremely critical attitude of the British Censor Board and their statement that they do not approve pictures falling in the "horrific" category for exhibition in England." They made a similar statement in another letter a week later.(70) The final film was passed by the BBFC without an H certificate.(71) As I mentioned earlier, these warnings about British censorship did not come to pass: between1936 and 1950, the BBFC banned only two horror films, both in 1942.(72)

Unsurprisingly, in 1939, the PCA tried very hard to dissuade Universal from making a second *Frankenstein* sequel, *Son of Frankenstein* (Universal, 1939, dir. Rowland V. Lee), and to discourage the other studios which, sensing a trend, were also contemplating the production of horror films. Following their established practise, much of this pressure focused on the potential banning of the film in the United Kingdom. On receiving the initial script for *Son*, Breen telephoned and wrote to Universal warning them to contact the BBFC regarding the film's possible "H" classification. However, the PCA also got in touch with the BBFC independently. Breen cabled the British Board of Film Classification, asking them "WOULD YOU BE DISPOSED TO APPROVE HORRIFIC PICTURE LIKE FRANKENSTEIN."

The reply was resolutely negative, although of course it only stated the BBFC's broad disapproval, rather than any statement of intention to ban new horror films:

FILM CREATED CONSIDERABLE PUBLIC OUTCRY AND PARTLY INSTRUMENTAL IN BRINGING INTO EXISTENCE HORRIFIC CATEGORY STOP FILM WOULD TODAY UNQUESTIONABLY COME WITHIN THIS CATEGORY STOP WE USE EVERY ENDEAVOUR TO PREVENT SUCH PRODUCTIONS.(73)

The PCA forwarded this response to Universal, as well as to Columbia (who had earlier in the year considered *The Man They Could Not Hang*), dryly commenting to Universal that "the above may be of some importance and value to you in the consideration of your plans to produce a "horror" picture."(74) This time, however, the PCA's established strategy of non-specific warnings about British censorship policy did not work: *Son of Frankenstein* had already gone into production.(75)

By the late 1930s, Production Code censorship negotiation was fully integrated into Hollywood filmmaking. As the moral conservative campaign died down, the debate over cinema censorship moved on from the issue of federal censorship. The dominant issue in censorship had now become overtly political content, and particularly anti-Fascist material. Greater debates over cinema censorship were now largely concerned with the limits of the Production Code's power to forbid explicitly political argument in a film, rather than with the social effects of sex, violence and horror. Crucially, this meant that when horror production resumed in 1939, it did so in a changed censorship climate in which, whatever the Production Code's policy on the matter, horror was far less central to the current censorship debate in American (and British) culture.

I have aimed in this article to make a case for scholars of Hollywood censorship and genre to take into account the complexities of British censorship and media controversies, and their relationship to the

British market and cinema culture - rather than relying upon the MPPDA as sources for the activities of other censorship bodies.

We can learn other very useful things from the more complex picture we thus gain of the controversy over horror production. The disputes over 1930s horror are particularly informative about the PCA's level of activity and *modus operandi* as it attempted to actively influence film trends. They also suggest some of the limits of PCA influence when pitted against commercial cinema's ultimate and defining goal: profit.

1. Review of *The Walking Dead*, *New York Times*, March 2 1936; reviews of *Dracula's Daughter*, *Hollywood Reporter*, May 2 1936 and *Variety*, May 20 1936; review of *Mark of the Vampire*, *Motion Picture Herald*, April 6 1935; review of *Mad Love*, *Motion Picture Daily*, undated; *Film Daily* review of *The Raven*, April 4 1935.
2. Box office reports, *Variety*, April 24, 1935, p. 8; May 15 1935, p. 9.
3. Box office statistics from *Variety*, May 8 – August 28 1935.
4. Gregory William Mank, *Hollywood Cauldron: Thirteen Horror Films From the Genre's Golden Age* (London: McFarland, 1995), p. 123.
5. Box office statistics from *Variety*, January 15 1936.
6. Box office statistics from *Variety*, January 15 - August 26 1936.
7. Mank, *Hollywood Cauldron*, p.xviii.
8. Box office reports, *Variety*, June 26 1935, p. 10.
9. Box office reports, *Variety*, July 31 1935, p.9; April 8 1936, p. 9.
10. Box office reports, *Variety*, June 17 1936, p. 6, 8.
11. Poster for *The Man Who Reclaimed His Head*, reprinted in Michael Brunas, John Brunas and Tom Weaver, *Universal Horrors: the Studio's Classic Films, 1931-1946* (London: McFarland, 1990).
12. Review of *The Man Who Reclaimed His Head*, Variety, Jan 15, 1935.
13. Poster for *The Story of Louis Pasteur*, reprinted in Altman, *Film/Genre*, p. 57. Altman also points out the use of a horror angle in service of his point that classical Hollywood marketing often evoked multiple genre identities in a film's marketing to widen its appeal.
14. Richard Maltby, "'Baby Face'", p. 30.
15. Richard Maltby, "'Baby Face' or How Joe Breen Made Barbara Stanwyck Atone For Causing the Wall Street Crash" in *Screen*, vol. 27 No. 2, March - April 1986, p. 30.
16. Ruth Vasey, *The World According to Hollywood, 1919-1939* (Exeter, University of Exeter, 1997) p. 101.
17. Maltby, "The Production Code and the Hays Office," p. 49.
18. Richard Maltby, "'Baby Face'", p. 22.
19. Maltby, "The Production Code and the Hays Office," p. 43.
20. Ruth Vasey, "An American Tragedy: A Comparison of Film and Literary Censorship", in *Quarterly Journal of Film and Video,* 1995, Vol. 15, no. 4, p. 87-98.
21. Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood*, p. 349.
22. Maltby, "The Production Code and the Hays Office," p. 54.
23. Michael Brunas, John Brunas and Tom Weaver, *Universal Horrors: the Studio's Classic Films, 1931-1946* (London: McFarland, 1990), p. 92.
24. Edmund G. Bansak, *Fearing the Dark: The Val Lewton Career* (London: McFarland, 1995), p. 112.
25. David J. Skal, *The Monster Show: a Cultural History of Horror* (London: Plexus, 1994), p. 195, 201.
26. Sarah J. Smith, *Children, Cinema and Censorship: From Dracula to the Dead End Kids* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2005), p.1.
27. Smith, *Children, Cinema and Censorship*, p.1.
28. Rhona Berenstein, *Attack of the Leading Ladies: Gender, Sexuality and Spectatorship in Classic Horror Cinem*a (New York: Columbia University Press, c1996), p. 15.
29. James C. Robertson, *The British Board of Film Censors: film censorship in Britain, 1896-1950* (London: Croom Helm, 1985), p.187-188.
30. Robertson, *The British Board of Film Censors*, p. 183.
31. Thomas Schatz, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (London: Faber, 1998), p. 235; James Curtis, *James Whale: A New World of Gods and Monsters* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), p. 267-276.
32. *Los Angeles Daily News*, June 17, 1931.

33. Curtis, *James Whale*, p. 291.
34. Article from *Michigan City News*, August 23 1935, PCA case file for *The Raven*, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Los Angeles.
35. Berenstein, *Attack of the Leading Ladies*, p. 15.
36. "Horror Films Taken Off U Sked", *Variety*, May 6, 1936.
37. Ruth Vasey, *The World According to Hollywood, 1919-1939* (Exeter, University of Exeter, 1997), p. 99.
38. James C. Robertson, *The Hidden Cinema: British film censorship in action 1913-75* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 5.
39. Smith, *Children, Cinema and Censorship*, p.62.
40. Smith, *Children, Cinema and Censorship*, p.121.
41. Robertson, *The British Board of Film Censors*, p. 56.
42. Smith, Children, *Cinema and Censorship*, p.56, 70-71.
43. Smith, Children, *Cinema and Censorship*, "Chapter Five: Children as Censors," and particularly p. 110, 165.
44. Smith, Children, Cinema and Censorship, p. 71-72.
45. Robertson, *The British Board of Film Censors*, p. 59.
46. Robertson, The British Board of Film Censors, p. 59.
47. Smith, *Children, Cinema and Censorship*, p. 59, 183.
48. Robertson, *The Hidden Cinema*, p. 66.
49. Smith, *Children, Cinema and Censorship*, p. 72.
50. Robertson, *The British Board of Film Censors*, p. 183, 188.
51. Richard Maltby, "'Baby Face' or How Joe Breen Made Barbara Stanwyck Atone For Causing the Wall Street Crash" in *Screen*, vol. 27 No. 2, March - April 1986, p. 30-31.
52. Maltby, "Baby Face," p. 30.
53. Breen to Warner, September 26 1935, PCA case file for *The Walking Dead.*
54. Breen to Warner, December 2 1935, PCA case file for *The Walking Dead.*
55. Letter from Breen to Zehner, January 15 1936, PCA case file for *Dracula's Daughter.*
56. Internal memo dated 13 September 1935, PCA case file for *Dracula's Daughter.*
57. Letter from Breen to Zehner, January 24 1936, PCA case file for *Dracula's Daughter.*
58. Letter from Breen to Zehner, February 4 1936, PCA case file for *Dracula's Daughter.*
59. Letter from Breen to Warner, September 26 1935, PCA case file for *The Walking Dead.*
60. Correspondence between Breen and Warner, September 26 1935 to January 20 1936, PCA case file for *The Walking Dead.*
61. Correspondence between Breen and MGM, September 12 1935 to April 7 1936, PCA case file for *The Devil Doll.*
62. Regional censor reports for *The Walking Dead*, dated February 27 to May 21 1936; *Dracula's Daughter*, dated May 28 to June 25, 193; and *The Devil Doll*, dated June 26 to August 31, 1936, in from PCA case files for above films.
63. Studio press book for *The Devil Doll,* Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Production Material Collection, Margaret Herrick Library.
64. For a fuller account of the PCA's dealings with studios over international issues, see Vasey, *The World According to Hollywood*, p. 127-157.
65. Breen to Zehner, April 24, 1936, PCA case file for *Man-Made Monster.*
66. Breen to Zehner, April 24, 1936, PCA case file for *Man-Made Monster.*
67. Letters from Breen to Harry Cohn, September 30, October 5 and October 25 1938, PCA case file for *The Man They Could Not Hang.*
68. Letter from Breen to Zehner, March 22 1938, PCA case file for *The Invisible Man Returns.*

69. Letter from Breen to Pivar, June 3 1939, PCA case file for *The Invisible Man Returns.*
70. Letters from Breen to Pivar, September 26 1939 and October 6 1939, PCA case file for *The Invisible Man Returns.*
71. Robertson, *The British Board of Film Censors,* p. 183, 188.
72. Robertson, *The British Board of Film Censors,* p. 187.
73. Telegram from Breen to "Censofilm, London", November 3 1938; telegram from Brooke Wilkinson to Breen, November 4 1938, in PCA case file for *Son of Frankenstein.*
74. Letter from Breen to Cliff Work, President of Universal, November 7 1938; letter from Breen to B. B. Kahane at Columbia, November 7 1938, PCA case file for *Son of Frankenstein.*
75. Letter from Work to Breen, Nov 12, 1938, PCA case file for *Son of Frankenstein*.