

Mark McKenna, *Nasty Business: The Marketing and Distribution of the Video Nasties* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), pp. 205, ISBN 978 1 4744 5108 6 (hb), £80.00.

*Nasty Business* is an ambitious and well-informed attempt by Mark McKenna to challenge what he regards as a number of misconceptions about the early days of the video industry in the UK and then to go on to explore the after-life of the ‘video nasties’ in the DVD and Blu-ray eras. The latter aspect of the book very usefully takes up the story begun by Kate Egan in *Trash or Treasure* (2007), which was reviewed in issue 6: 2 of the *Journal*.

In the first part of *Nasty Business*, McKenna is concerned to rebut the idea, endlessly recycled by much of the national press in the early 1980s, that the ‘video nasties’ should be understood as ‘something new, foreign or different’ or as some form of dangerous cultural ‘invasion’ (3). To this end he points out that almost half of the 72 films on the Director of Public Prosecutions’ (DPP) lists of videos that were liable to prosecution under the Obscene Publications Act (OPA) had received a prior theatrical release (albeit in many cases cut by the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC), although the author doesn’t make this sufficiently clear). And taking on the familiar argument that some of the early independent video distributors brought the ‘video nasty’ panic on themselves by putting out overly lurid promotional material, he argues that ‘this is only applicable to a small handful of the long list of video nasties’ (57) and that:

It is methodologically problematic to allow two or three examples of extreme approaches to promotion to stand in place of a full assessment of the material ... In assessing the relative extremism of these promotions, a full range of examples that were available and on display in video shops across the UK needs to be considered. (72)

From such a consideration, McKenna concludes that:

None of these designs is without historical precedent or contemporaneous parallels.

Promotions of this type are as much a part of the cinematic tradition of horror as the horror film itself. Horror film producers and distributors have long relied upon the excessive and the gratuitous as a means of promoting their latest horror. (57)

He also draws parallels with the kinds of horrific cover imagery of paperbacks such as the Dennis Wheatley horror titles published by Arrow Books, the *Pan Book of Horror* series and the so-called 'men's adventure magazines', whose numerous Nazi-themed issues in particular employed imagery far more lurid than that on the video cover of *SS Experiment Camp* (1976), although the more extreme of these would not have been on sale – at least openly – in the UK at the time.

Whilst these points are well taken, the question still remains of why and how the 'video nasty' panic ignited such a blaze that it resulted in the imposition of state video censorship administered by the newly renamed British Board of Film Classification (BBFC). One answer is that even the relatively limited application by the video distributors of the techniques of showmanship and ballyhoo associated in the States with horror directors such as William Castle and Herschell Gordon Lewis was still far too much for the guardians of taste and decency in the UK. Indeed, it is surely significant that the only person actually to be gaoled under the OPA for distributing a 'nasty' was David Hamilton-Grant, who orchestrated what McKenna calls 'a fantastically carnivalesque campaign' (87) in order to promote *Nightmares in a Damaged Brain* (1981), the video version of which was guilty of containing the mere 48 seconds cut from the theatrical print by the BBFC. Similarly a relentless campaign was waged by the police and the DPP against Palace Video, who marked the release of both the cinema version and video of *The Evil Dead* (1981) with a competition to win a year's supply of red meat, and made a point in their publicity for the video of drawing attention to the failed legal actions against it.

A further answer is that video was a new medium, and, in the UK, new media, particularly those aimed at a wide audience, are automatically regarded with suspicion and hostility by the authorities (in which category I would most certainly include most of the national press) and moral campaign groups such as the National Viewers and Listeners Association (NVLA). Thus images that might have escaped censure in a bookshop, unless, that is, they were of the kind that had sparked off the 1950s moral panic against horror comics analysed by Martin Barker in *A Haunt of Fears* (1984), would be viewed differently in a medium almost inevitably destined for official damnation – at least in its first iteration as an independent video distribution sector.

*Nasty Business* is particularly valuable for drawing attention to the forces *within* the nascent UK video industry which contributed to the growth of the ‘video nasty’ moral panic and, at the same time, hastened the decline of the independent distributors. Thus in researching the role which, it has always been widely claimed, complaints about video advertising to the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) played in the construction of the panic, McKenna discovered that it had had no records of any complaints made *directly* to it about trade magazine advertisements for the classic ‘nasties’ *The Driller Killer* (1979), *SS Experiment Camp* and *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980). However, what he did unearth was a passage in the ASA’s 1982-3 annual report which noted that the video distributors body, the British Videogram Association (BVA), was

rightly anxious about the standard of much of the packaging and many of the advertisements. The BVA sent us several complaints about advertisements so revolting (as, for example, those entitled *SS Extermination Camp* [sic] and *Driller Killer*) that we were appalled by their publication and took stern action to prevent a repetition. The Authority is pleased that the video trade is making efforts to ensure compliance with BCAP [the UK Code of Broadcast Advertising] and will continue to use the full range of sanctions at its disposal to repress breaches of the Code. (15)

As McKenna notes, it would appear that ‘the trade body designated with representing the needs of the industry [was] reporting on sectors of their own industry’ and was ‘conspiring against the industry that they claimed to represent’(16). This, quite correctly, he takes to be indicative of an early division within the industry between distributors thought of as ‘responsible’ and ‘mainstream’ (16) and those regarded as ‘unsavoury’ (17).

As is well known, the Hollywood majors entered the video market late in the day as they thought that home video would decimate the cinema audience, which was then rapidly declining anyway. McKenna usefully sketches the UK arrival of the first majors in 1980-2 (40), before giving a more detailed account of the development of the independent distribution sector (40-2, 46-8). These pages leave one in little doubt that the BVA and the newly arrived majors regarded the labels distributing the kinds of videos that featured on the DPP’s lists as hindering the development of the kind of ‘respectable’ (and profitable) video industry that they desired. Thus they weren’t exactly sorry when the Video Recordings Act 1984 (VRA) caused many of these labels to go out of business, not least as they couldn’t afford to have their entire back catalogues classified by the BBFC. In this respect, McKenna quotes Steve Woolley, then the managing director of Palace Pictures, to the effect that the VRA was indeed partly about censorship, but, more importantly, ‘it was how the majors wrested control again ... it was a way of suppressing in many respects the importance of the independents’ (17).

The extent to which this was deliberate, or simply a side-effect of the legislation, is difficult to gauge, but McKenna is undoubtedly correct when he states that ‘the motivations to censor the video nasties were more complex than the narrative of the moral panic would have us believe and were determined more by economic considerations than by any concern over the content of the films’ (24). In this respect he draws an illuminating parallel between the passing of the VRA and the very considerable tightening of film censorship in Hollywood in 1934 by the operations of the Motion Picture Code which, as Richard Maltby has argued, had more to do with economic

considerations than moral ones – in particular, the maintenance by the majors of their dominance of the market. Both instances of censorship can be seen, McKenna argues, as ‘the culmination of a lengthy process of negotiation between representatives of the industry and those speaking with the voice of cultural authority’ (24). And, curiously enough, writing in the *Independent* in 1988 just as the BBFC was finishing its mammoth task of classifying the back catalogues of all the distributors still in the market (roughly 65, down from about 140 in the early days, with the six majors now accounting for 80 per cent of the market), I observed:

Watching the rapid development of the video industry from a mass of small businesses to a virtual oligopoly in a matter of a few years has been like viewing the growth of Hollywood on fast forward – a process in which the Video Recordings Act has played a significant role, by helping to make small-scale operation uneconomic.

And in order further to back up McKenna’s case about the growing ‘respectability’ of the industry as a result of the VRA, one could cite the President’s Introduction to that year BBFC *Annual Report*, which stated that:

We may take some pride in the contribution made by the Board to the new, improved image of the video industry, since by diligent attention to the contents of tapes, and since 1987 to their packaging and advertising as well, we have helped this fledgling industry to put its past reputation behind it. If video can now take its rightful place as an important and prosperous sector of the entertainment industry, it is because of the quality and variety of so much of its recent family product, and the increasing professionalism with which it is presented to the public. All of us at the BBFC are pleased to have played a part in this development.

Here, surely, is a subject that calls out for still further exploration.

Moving on to the after-life of the ‘nasties’, McKenna traces what he calls ‘the formation of a kind of banned brand’ (96) as, thanks first to DVD and then Blu-ray, as well as to a relaxation of

censorship, most of the ‘nasties’ eventually re-emerged into the marketplace (although some are still subject to minor BBFC cuts). In the process, he argues, the idea of what constitutes a ‘video nasty’ has become more complicated, with the ‘reductionist rhetoric of the [original] press campaigns’ combining with the fact that these formerly stigmatised films have become a ‘commercially viable and valuable commodity’ (97). This is undoubtedly the case, and I have not the slightest problem with the commodification of the ‘nasties’ – indeed I greatly welcome the opportunity to watch them uncensored, in pristine Blu-ray and stuffed with extras of every conceivable kind. But where I would take issue with McKenna is his argument that that the term ‘video nasty’ has taken on

generic implications, evolving beyond simple journalistic rhetoric and media moral panic into a commercially viable distributive category; a pseudo-genre into which films not historically thought of as being video nasties can be included and excluded as part of a discursive evolution and economic strategy .... The term has evolved discursively from a finite list of films into a broader functional industrial category. (121)

Here, like Kate Egan, McKenna is drawing on the ‘user-oriented approach’ to genre formation elaborated by Rick Altman in *Film/Genre* (1998) in opposition to the traditional approach that stresses generic fixity. Utilising this approach, McKenna considers ‘where and by whom the [video nasty] terminology has been used, as a means of reviewing how an imposed cultural category has evolved to take on generic connotations’ (123), and how the ‘video nasty’ has mutated from a ‘discursively constructed genre into an industrially adopted commercial genre’ (128).

What I find difficult to accept, however, is not Altman’s approach to genre but the idea of ‘video nasties’ as constituting a genre in any accepted sense of the word. This was not a term coined in the first place by film fans or film theorists but by sensation-hungry reporters in the national press who knew precisely nothing about modern horror cinema and cared even less for

truth and factual accuracy. It was then weaponised by the army of hyper-conservative pundits who populate the editorial columns of those newspapers, which also gave considerable space to Mary Whitehouse to propagandise on behalf of the NVLA. Equally ignorant about modern horror cinema – indeed horror cinema *tout court* – were those harried by the press into taking action against the ‘nasties’, namely the DPP, the police, the courts and those responsible for constructing the Video Recordings Act (excepting the BBFC in this last instance). Thus, I would argue, the films which featured on the DPP’s various lists, which are conventionally taken to constitute the ‘video nasties’ are all indeed genre films of various kinds (and not simply horror films), but ‘nasties’ themselves do not constitute a specific genre or even sub-genre. Rather, the term denotes a cultural category, and, crucially, a uniquely British one. Hence my use of scare quotes for ‘video nasties’ throughout this review.

The reason why, in my view, the term ‘video nasty’ should be reserved simply to indicate films which featured on the DPP’s cinematically illiterate lists is that a term which originated in the infantile and hysterical discourse of papers such as the *Mail* really has no place in critical discourse about cinema – other than, of course, in discussions about film and video censorship. To call a film a ‘nasty’ says absolutely nothing useful about it, other than the fact that it was the object of censorship in the UK in the 1980s and 1990s. I would argue that if Blu-ray distributors wish to use the term ‘video nasty’ as a promotional ploy to sell Blu-rays of films previously stigmatised by the DPP, and if thereby the films undergo the process of cultural reframing and even canonisation that McKenna expertly analyses in *Nasty Business*, then that is not only unproblematic but thoroughly welcome. But when the term is applied to videos that were never officially classed as ‘nasties’ – as in, for example, books such as Alan Bryce’s *Video Nasties 2: Strike up the Banned* (2001) and the second edition of Nigel Wingrove and Marc Morris’s *The Art of the Nasty* (2009) – there is a real danger that the term simply becomes evacuated of meaning and voided of any kind of analytical function. As McKenna notes: ‘The popular

understanding of what a video nasty consists of [has transformed] the finite list into an expansive all-purpose category of excess or extremity' (136), and this, I would contend, is of far greater use to video distributors and book publishers than it is to film scholars interested in the films which were stigmatised as 'nasties' and in the various cinematic genres and sub-genres to which these films properly belong.

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