

The censor as audience: James Ferman at the British Board of Film Classification

Martin Barker,
Aberystwyth University, UK

Abstract:

As part of a large research project exploring the UK controversy over David Cronenberg's *Crash*, I was able to interview the then Director of the British Board of Film Classification about his role, and the Board's role, in defending the film against its critics, particularly the *Daily Mail*. The interview has never been published. But it retains some value, as it offers revealing insights into the complex ways in which a 'censor' functions as audience, and surrogate audience, and makes judgements based on images of a film and its 'audience'.

Keywords: James Ferman, BBFC, *Crash*, images of the audience.

On 5 August 1998, I had the opportunity to interview the then Director of the UK's British Board of Film Classification (BBFC), about the Board's role in the controversy then taking place in the UK over David Cronenberg's film *Crash*.¹ The controversy had been particularly whipped up and maintained for almost a year by the rightwing newspaper, the *Daily Mail*, whose film reviewer Christopher Tookey (1997) had attacked the film as 'perverse', marking the 'point at which even a liberal society must draw the line'.² The *Mail* then attacked the BBFC when it indicated that it was inclined to release the film uncut in the UK, even door-stepping examiners and digging into their private lives.³ With two colleagues, Jane Arthurs, and Ramaswami Harindranath, I had been engaged in a research project (funded by the Economic and Social Research Council [Grant No. R000222194]) exploring the controversy, comparing the reception of the film in Britain, France and the USA, and mounting a large study of audience responses to *Crash*.

Ferman had been the BBFC's Director for a long time, taking up the role in 1975, but was nearing the end of his career there. In 1999 he would retire, and he died in 2002. Ferman was notorious for a combination of authoritarian control over the Board's decisions, coupled with personal delight in various kinds of art-house cinema (even in the face of

criticisms), and personal eccentricities (most famously his dislike of nunchakus (Japanese fighting chains) and refusal to let them appear in BBFC-approved films.⁴

Ferman willingly agreed to be interviewed – perhaps in part because on this occasion the BBFC was on the side of anti-censorship folks. Ferman knew well my critical position regarding the thinking, procedures and decisions of the BBFC, but put no restrictions around what we talked about (although that must not be taken to mean that there were no power-plays in the interview).⁵ I transcribed the interview at the time, so that Jane, Hari and I could consider the ways in which it fed into and contextualised the controversy. Our book (Barker et al., 1998) which presented the findings of the overall project, mentioned the interview, but made no substantive use of its contents. Yet on reflection, it is of considerable interest. In it, Ferman reveals a striking combination of personal responses to *Crash*, estimations of its likely ‘audience’, and a canny appreciation of how and why it was being attacked by the *Mail*.

While clearly it throws light on the thoughts and decisions of a key decision-maker at that period, it helps in other ways. It reminds us, generally, of the ways in which ‘audiences’ are only rarely and exceptionally end-points, the simple recipients of ‘messages’ which – like soft-nosed bullets – burst upon impact, leaving their ‘influence’ in the receiving body. Rather, audiences are almost inevitably situated in networks, and within relationships. These range from the very informal (friends, relatives, colleagues) to the very formal (legal, institutional). It should also remind us that audiences almost always have more than personal reactions to films (or any other materials). Parents may watch with an eye to children (and children may watch with an eye not just to enjoyment but to ‘what it is like to be an adult’). Friends can watch with a view to subsequent comparing of reactions. Fans view things with an eye to their participation in networks of responses (and their role and status within those). And as for academics – we watch in the most peculiar ways of all (with an eye to usefulness to teaching, developments in our fields, what might be said or written about a film, let alone our position on the many theoretical and political fault-lines which structure film studies).

In short, while Ferman may be distinctive in the particular *role* he was fulfilling, and his distinctive way of filling that role, in some ways the complexity of his responses is a mirror-image of *every* person’s ways of responding. The difference is, he was in a position to enforce the outcomes of his views – even if, on this occasion, he was on ‘our side’. This allowed him to be somewhat relaxed, and may perhaps make the interview more revealing than one that had been conducted in more confrontational circumstances.

Interview with James Ferman (Director of the British Board of Film Classification) (conducted at the Offices of the BBFC, London, 5 August 1998)

Interviewer: Martin Barker (Transcribed by MB)

The interview opened with MB giving a brief account of the nature and purposes of the research into the Crash controversy.

MB: So, what I'd like to start with is taking you back to the way in which the BBFC arrived at its judgement, because, I mean, I was reading your press release again and, you have a very interesting expression for it. You call it an "unusual and disturbing film" and then you go on to give a narrative summary of it in the press release. And I am interested in both, if you like, the standard processes a film goes through to get to classification, but given clearly this one had to be treated somewhat differently because it was so much a topic already of a great deal of argument and controversy, what changes did you have to make in the process of arriving at your evaluation?

JF: Well you can't always start with a clean slate but ideally you should. So we try to set aside anything we had heard but with *Crash* of course or *Lolita* you can't, because the publicity has been so enormous and because virtually everybody has a preconception of the film from what they've read. It's just our job to keep up with opinion because we read a lot, I think you come to recognise the kind of err, the kind of coverage a film gets because it's marked out as tabloid controversy, and there's going to be a lot of mileage in this film for an editor, so they build up the framework through which people see the film, umm, and, and the frame of reference changes when people have seen the film, once, once it is part of their experience. Umm, so we tried, we know to some extent where certain critics or journalists are coming from and we try to make allowances for that, umm, but of course whatever happens once you start viewing at the Board, you have an open book in front of you, you are taking detailed notes, and what you've got to get is what's there. The first requirement for an examiner is to notice everything, the first thing we look for is what do you notice, everything you hear, everything you see, we don't want examiners to miss anything significant. And the second is how they interpret what they see, how they make it fit together and get an overall view of the film as a whole. And they have to judge the parts and the whole so that certain scenes are clearly '18' so that other scenes are clearly '15' are borderline, and then at the end they must make a judgement on the film as a whole. Umm, and that tends to be what shifts with discussion, the judgement of the film as a whole. Now with *Crash* of course we were in '18' territory right from the beginning ...⁶

MB: Absolutely ...

JF: ... all the way through, the only issue was '18', the only issue was, was it more than '18', whether we had problems and umm, to what extent was it a problem, were there legal problems, and two distinguished journalists had said there would be legal problems, this film they believed was 'depraved and corrupting'.⁷

MB: Yeh, I mean, did they specify more than that what they thought the legal problems might be?

JF: No, no, they didn't, umm, it's interesting – I don't want to name names ...

MB: ... that's fine ...

JF: ... but one of the journalists always starts from an anti-censorship position, that every film has a right to be seen and let the audience judge, dismiss it, etc etc but clearly indicated that in his view it probably wouldn't but probably shouldn't also be shown for legal reasons, that in some ways it was threatening the moral health of the nation. Umm, and you start knowing that someone has said that in print, but when you are seeing it for the first time, the first team of examiners, it's their job to get the facts down on paper. So they have to take an objective view of the film and they have to write a first para to pick up all the essential narrative facts, umm, and I have to say that the first team was disturbed to some extent – I was very disturbed, because I had been very very close to Lord Harlech, who died in a car crash in '85 and he was, well he made me here really, he taught me to handle myself in public, and how to take the stage, and how to express myself, and erm in controversial situations, and that whatever we do will be controversial and this was the deal with it, you know. And he was a really wonderful man, he was a great middle of the road politician, old school, noblesse oblige, he worked very hard in the public service, he had a noble ideal of public service. I mean, he'd sat with Kennedy through the whole Cuban missile crisis, and er apparently was, played a central part in how that was handled. And he was a diplomat, a wonderful diplomat – he was ambassador to Washington at that time. And suddenly in January '85 – he'd been here twenty years, I'd worked with him for 10 years – and he was killed in a car crash, I think going back to Harlech from London, and apparently his, his car – he always drove slightly too fast – his car umm was hit smack on, it spun round and round and they think he died probably instantly. But I heard it on the morning news, I woke up and my wife shook, shook me and said that, you know, David Harlech is dead, And that really shattered me, and for three days I was really shattered. And I hadn't considered death in a crash very closely since that, and it all came back ...

MB: ... amazing ...

JF: .. and so I was very shaken and I found the, the conjunction of death in a car crash and eroticism very very uncomfortable, I found it uncomfortable to link the two emotions, it had never occurred to me to link the two, so that was a personal reaction, it was much much deeper than anybody else felt. And, er, I found it very, very uncomfortable viewing but as in all Cronenberg's films one was aware of a mastery of

his craft. It was a very well-made film, and I then had to come back to it with another viewing, and there was a second viewing and a third viewing, and so eventually we had five or six viewings. Umm, and after the first one there were, I think Margaret Ford and I both sat in on the first one, and I think there may have been three examiners, but there were three or four, for the screenings after that, and er the second time I admired it much more, I thought it had very good control of its tone, and er, and realised it was treating a delicate theme, but, a very sensitive film but treating it delicately, with restraint.

MB: Am I right in remembering that you've admired Cronenberg's films before?

JF: Yes, I, I mean, his first couple of films – I'm not a great horror fan, I felt there was an intelligent script there, and I didn't quite like the OTT stuff in *Rabid* and *Shivers* but I could see that he was a horror director trying to say something through the horror, and I thought it was very interesting. And then his later films, each one I enjoyed more, umm, I mean *The Fly* is the big popular success, I mean he's never come up with anything to match that where he can actually speak directly ...

MB: ... spectacularly popular with women, I believe, and I don't know why ...

JF: ... maybe they're used to the monster in men! [Laughter] Anyway I've enjoyed his development, very strangely, it wasn't by design but we've never asked for cuts in a Cronenberg film because I've always thought he stopped at just the right point.⁸ He's dealing with excess, and excess is his subject, but there's a kind of built in restraint, and I thought with *Crash*, umm, it was it was very clever the way he knew when to stop, with all the sex scenes which were, many of them were erotic but they were restrained in the way he never, you never felt he was going to go beyond what was acceptable. Umm, and it was very interesting what he'd done with the script, because I had once tried to read *Crash* and found the narrative very difficult, and Vaughan's character which has a much much bigger part in the book, very difficult. And the subject really, I think the book is unfilmable, having finished it while I was seeing the film. But when I first read, one Sunday paper printed the script in their magazine *Independent on Sunday* and that was very interesting and that was nothing like the book which I was then reading.

MB: Yes. And yet Ballard regarded it in many ways as a faithful rendition of the book.

JF: I don't understand that. He got the core of it, which he expressed, but the film, the fantasies are all active rather than passive. The fantasies are about injuring people, you know, in the book the fantasy is sadistic, the pleasure in inflicting cruelty and injury on other people whereas the film is all about receiving pain and injury from

others, and the orientation is totally different. One is about sadism and one's about masochism. And that, that to me was a very significant difference. Because, well, we were only dealing with the film, so one had to set aside what Ballard had written, and given what Ballard had written I think Cronenberg's script is probably the only way it could have, could have been put on screen. Umm, but then I went back to the film, I saw, I saw it four, five times, - I am trying to think how they were spaced out. The whole thing was spaced out over a long time, because er, the President had to be, and there were two Vice-Presidents then, and yes Lord Birkett did see it⁹, umm, and I think they all saw it, our own solicitor came to see it and, in the light of the allegations that it would be depraving and corrupting, and so we, he said If I were you I would get Counsel's opinion on this, and he said I am not sure if there's anything in this that could be described as depraving and corrupting, it's too ... weird, it's not, there's no straightforward kind of influence that it's exerting, and what are you going to encourage people to do, run round on the roads killing people deliberately? That's not what the film is about, umm, and the thrill of being bumped from behind of the road, and er, but he said I just think we need legal advice, someone to refer to, if we've taken legal advice. And then the barrister, we got a very very distinguished QC, and he said I would get a forensic psychologist to look at this as well, so that my advice can refer to expert psychological opinion because I don't know what kind of influence this would have, but you want somebody who would be familiar with ... you also want to know, is this a typical kind of syndrome, of are there, you know, people who have fantasies about car crashes. Is it a well know psychological quirk? And er, we got ...

MB: ... Paul Britton? ...

JF: Paul Britton, and he said to me on the phone, it's certainly not a well-known kind of fantasy but he said there are, people have fantasies about cars, cars are sex symbols in lots of ways, but he said it's not a well known fantasy and I would have to go back into the literature and look at it again. So in the end it was a very slow process, because the QC wanted to see it a second time, and then Paul Britton couldn't come in for ages and ages and ages, and he finally saw it and then it took about four weeks, I think, before we got anything on paper from him. And the barrister – they hadn't met face to face, they'd worked together before on a case, and he gave me questions he wanted me to ask so I was passing the questions on, and please would you cover, give us a paragraph on this particular aspect, and er, so it took from I think about October of '96 until the beginning of March '97 when we'd got both reports in, distributed them to the Board, the President and Vice-Presidents, then we had a meeting and we decided that their reports did confirm, both reports, our approach we'd come to after many viewings that the film was not depraving and corrupting, and not likely to have a damaging effect on likely viewers, and that we could pass it '18', and we did. Umm, and it was really wasn't that we were holding it up deliberately, because it was too hot

to handle, which a lot of journalists thought, umm, it was that it was so weird as a film, it was a one-off, and there'd never been anything, we couldn't compare it to anything, and ...

MB: Well, that's what I was going to ask you, I mean, that is a long process – are there precedents? Are there precedents for other films where you've had to take this length of time and complexity?

JF: *Kissed* took a long time, but that was in the wake of our new President, we knew that he was joining and we felt we had to, the two Vice-Presidents had seen it, and we had to get the President in because it was going to be his name on it ...

MB: ... yes ...

JF: ... so, that was a long delay, then he wanted to take legal opinion himself, and consult child psychiatrists and experts in paedophilia from the police and all that, so it's a similar process, we had to wait for expert opinion, umm, and I would think he took about six months ...

MB: ... right ...

JF: umm, which is about as long as I can remember. Oh, go back to the beginning of the '80s, *Caligula* took a long time, but that took a long time because we had to, er, Customs made us agree that they would release it in bond to us and, er, they had to have the right to come and see it before any of the cuts left the building and, you know, all of that.¹⁰ And then in the end they wouldn't allow us to return the cuts to the company! [Laughs] But that, there were a lot of cuts, and the lawyers had to approve every version and at the time they, everybody thought it would be obscene in its uncut form and it would probably would have been.

MB: It wasn't a question I intended to ask, but if *Caligula* were to come up now, do you think it would ...

JF: It's so long since I've seen it ... I don't know, I remember some of the shots but it's not a film that lingers in my memory for its cinematic quality! But *Crash*, you know, I think, any time in the last five years we would probably have come to the same decision, I think before that it would have been more difficult, because I think ... there's not that much violence in it, it's a violent idea, em, but I mean, it had come in in the '80s, em, I think the sex would have been a problem, in the '90s we are much more relaxed about sex and we haven't cut a mainstream film for sex content for a very long time. Umm, I think *Scandal* was the last one with a two-second cut, there

was real sex going on, it had an orgy [laughs] but that's the last time, you know, I don't remember what year that was. Umm, the examiners were divided on the quality of *Crash* ..

MB: .. were they? ..

JF: some people seemed to admire it from the beginning, em, possibly for the boldness of it, particularly for a very outré theme, but er, and one examiner found it very disturbing, one examiner had been in a serious car crash and said it was amazing, this film's got exactly the kind of change that comes over you, and so I reacted, I left my job after the crash, and I took off and drove round America, and I can't remember exactly, but he said it changed my life, I gave up one life completely and took a different kind of job when I came back, and I just felt it was a watershed in my experience, it was so serious and when you come that close to death, your life changes. And er, nobody else cited a personal experience but people did think that it was life *in extremis* so that was interesting.

MB: I take it in the, what, year and a half now since the decision was made, nothing had happened that has revised your feelings about the film.

JF: Well, we undertook to wait a year after it opened in the cinema to see whether there were any damaging effects, you know, in society ...

MB: ... oh right ...

JF: and it came round again, which meant that umm, you know, it came in after a year and it fell to our new President to decide and er, I mean he had three very difficult decisions to make in his first year ...

MB: Yes, *Kissed*, *Lolita* and *Crash* ...

JF: ... and there were some minor ones also which were interesting, umm, so it was a kind of launch for him, a baptism of fire.

MB: So after a year you reviewed it, you obviously did confirm it ..

JF: We didn't think it had proved to be dangerous to society, and we had no problem of ... no report from any other country, I mean, most European countries, we had a Euro conference here in September last year and er, particularly when I raised it there, a lot of countries said well, practically every country in the EC, umm, it was yawns, it hadn't been much of an issue and there hadn't been any effects except boredom, I mean, not

many people at that conference were impressed by it and because it hadn't made a big press story it wasn't, there wasn't that much attention to it, it was just a film that had, you know, it didn't exceed the limits for sex and er, that was really it ..

MB: Right

JF: And I've spoken to Americans, it could take a long time to go through it there and they, they couldn't understand what the fuss was about here.

MB: Do you have an answer to that? Do you have any sense as to why it did arouse such heat in Britain, and it seems in Britain alone?

JF: Well, I mean, I have to say I think that there was something going on in one particular newspaper chain that had a lot to do with it, and I think their, they have their own agenda and they are looking for films that will fit into that agenda. Every year there are going to be three or four films that are condemned by the two newspapers that ...

MB: ... we won't name them, but we do know! [Laughter]¹¹

JF: No, exactly, but they did, but I mean really the Board were put through the mill on that, because they wrote profiles of everybody here.

MB: Well they doorstepped you, didn't they?

JF: And they door-s..., well not, yes they did on one Sunday, my wife said there is somebody at the door and I said I am not answering it, and when I came into the office working that day, I come in a lot of weekends and she rang me and said that er, they had been there all afternoon standing outside, and er, you know they were there early in the morning too, and the same thing happened to Margaret Ford that day, and she went out just to get away from them, and her daughter was very frightened by, because they kept after her, and er, you know, she broke into tears at the door. They were horrible to our examiners, they took candid snaps of them, when they were taking a child to school, and they got all of them looking so awful and then they said, you know, divorced or separated, prying into people's private lives that hadn't anything to do with their capacity, I mean, they are a very bright team and er, you know they were treated shabbily, and we had to call a meeting and say, you know, you have been treated badly and I said that this has happened to me but I get paid for it and you don't, you shouldn't have to put up with it. And er ...

MB: Do you have any kind of redress when, when something like that happens?

JF: Well, we went, over one paper, it happened to be a different newspaper, it was over an article, to the Press Complaints Commission, and they didn't take it seriously, and dismissed it and they were patently wrong according to their code. I realised we're not going to be loved by anybody, it goes with the territory!

[Laughter] *We talk over each other for a moment.*

And so, you know in the end, it's never happened with another film, it probably won't do any more but we, we now print pictures of everybody in the Annual Report and, you know, for example we are much more transparent this year, umm, we issue periodic press releases.

MB: Is that in fact one of the, almost side-effects of these controversies?

JF: No, I think that when Andreas [Whittam smith] came as President he said well the best answer to press intrusion is to be so open that there's nothing to intrude into, and so you know, I think our road show was a great success, umm, the numbers built up and at the end you know we had 150 to 200 for the last three, and er, the reception was very good in that we had terrific rows at, but it was mostly polarised in the audience. There were always a few from pressure groups and there were some, at Liverpool it seemed almost everybody there was from a pressure group ...

MB: ... really? ...

JF: .. and er, and at the Commonwealth Institute er, we had a libertarian riot one night, people who had gone to represent the *Sport* newspaper who had been advertising the dates of all our Roadshows, would go along and speak up for freedom, it was the 'R18' category and why do you cut anything for adults, which is a legitimate issue, and er, and they were sitting there with people from the right-wing pressure groups, it was just, it was astonishing! It was a great, a great display of fireworks and all the rest, so that was interesting. But we also got very good questions, and we answered everything honestly. One place we didn't answer one question which we did begin to afterwards which took us by surprise, but, but on the whole we er learned a lot from it, and it was fascinating to go around the country and to go to Liverpool, Glasgow, Belfast and see that there are different attitudes to bad language, different attitudes to sex, people are more worried about it the further north you go, and er, yes, we learned a lot and we are going to go on doing it – I will not be here next year, but we are going to continue every year, do something partly for our own learning but partly because it's, as soon as you bring the debate into the open, it's very interesting, and people feel refreshed, and when they leave, I think genuinely people thought it was a very useful experience. Virtually everybody who was there, when they signed the

questionnaire, said they understood the BBFC's concerns far more, and BBFC policy, and on agreement they were different, but virtually everybody thought they'd learned a lot.

MB: There's two kinds of cross-cutting criteria, I sense – again, this isn't something I had thought I wanted to ask, but with relation to *Crash* clearly one of the questions you were asking was, is there any reason to believe that someone might be damaged or harmed or led into criminality ...

JF: Well, manners and morals are two overriding groups of criteria, er, and manners you could call offensiveness, and morals we are talking about consequential morality, where you are hurting people in some way or other. And so, we call it offensiveness and harm ...

MB: ... where presumably things like bad language come more in ...

JF: Bad language is not really harm, though some people feel it so deeply, for example in Liverpool, that er, they feel harmed, they feel damaged, feel soiled in some way. You know, they are so convinced that the heart of their morality is the words you use, they almost don't like the *word* for 'sex' more than they don't like the sight of sex. It doesn't seem to excite them in the same way. Umm, and to have a child umm, swearing and actually taught to swear in *Hope and Glory* was corrupting children, that child is being corrupted, and er you know the film-makers should go to gaol, and they were really incensed, two people, on this issue in Liverpool. It was quite extraordinary. Umm, and er, two women left in Liverpool, er, you know *Hope and Glory* ..

MB: Yes ...

JF: ... you know the scene in which the boys line up to look down the girl's knickers, umm, two women left and said at the door that they'd been abused as children, and they couldn't watch that, it was, they were watching the sexual abuse of that girl. Umm, and when you realise that some people will respond from their experience like that, you know, you have to sympathise. Umm, and so it's, you know you learn about audiences by going out there, and it's different, I mean letters and phone calls tell you something, but seeing them face to face, and seeing the pain on their faces, and in Belfast there were two women that really thought that we were corrupting children and had been for about twenty years, and just wanted to roll the clock back. And the pain was palpable. It's important, it's important, you know, if we are going to do the job we do, we must appreciate the feeling ...

MB: When you did your review after a year, I know you said that you drew on European experiences and you presumably had umm, because of regular contacts say with the police, you would know whether any cases had come up of that kind – were there any other kinds of evidence that you thought, we ought to check here or we ought to ask here, or anything like that?

JF: Well, we want to know whether anything, whether there were particular susceptibilities to, like that, to be taken into account. We want to know what the consequences would be of being aroused by a film which associates sexual arousal with damage, em, and er, I think we were worried particularly about the violent aspect of it, em, to what extent would people be turned as they could from the book with the idea of damaging people with cars for pleasure. Erm. And er, there were people who raised the issue of joy-riding, of whether teenagers who saw this film particularly on video would run into people or property for the sheer pleasure of damaging and be turned on by it. And it's interesting that almost every woman here or in a focus group of disabled people – nothing to do with disability – but they all had experience of having their cars bumped by men driving behind them who would bump into them just for the pleasure of seeing them get excited and frightened. Instilling fear and being turned on by women being afraid. And I mean, a lot of rape is about power, so that was an aspect that the law always has to consider because we are required to consider all aspects of the law. Umm, and offensiveness. And we concluded fairly quickly that this is a minority film, some people might be inspired to go and see it out of curiosity because of the *Daily Mail* campaign, but we thought on the whole it would exclude audiences from people who didn't want to see it, and they, a lot of people just wouldn't see a film like this and they were the people with the most to complain about. So in the end we felt that at '18' offensiveness is not really an issue.

MB: And when you came to the decision about video, because when you issued your first press release you signalled that you would think about video separately, what kinds of new consideration did come in then?

JF: Well, we always have to consider suitability for viewing in the home¹², and we now have a particular test that came in 1994 which is 'harm to potential viewers' including underage viewers because with the way the film treats, the manner in which it treats violence, horror, criminal behaviours, sex and drugs and, and this included all of them.

MB: Drugs?

JF: I think there was some pot-smoking at one point, I can't remember ...

MB: ... possibly in the scene where they are watching the crashes on video ..

JF: I think there was ...

MB: ... doesn't matter, doesn't matter ...

JF: But certainly you can see it as horror, but it's fantasy, and it's certainly violent and there's certainly sex and there's certainly criminal behaviour.

MB: So, did you have to do some serious reconsideration when it came to its decision for video?

JF: Well, we did think that it treated all these things responsibly, I mean, the price for the behaviour is so patent in that film, and the ending is so pained, I mean, nobody would want to be that couple at the end. Despite the fact that they have a kind of reconciliation, on the hillside, sexually, it's, the feeling at the end is they've been dabbling in something much too big for them, and too dangerous. It's all about embracing danger and finding the danger is too great. Umm, nobody in that film ends happily, umm, like *Lolita* the four central characters are, are, all end tragically. There are no role models in that film. And there are certainly no role models in this film. I mean, we, we, I think partly we were worried there would be an enormous fuss when people saw it, and there were very, very few complaints when people saw it. I mean, people that had seen it. The fuss went on when people hadn't seen it – how could you pass this film? Then I think we only had two complaints from people who had seen it, I, I think some of them went in order to complain. I remember the wonderful song in a 1950s review ... Dora Bryan sitting all alone in a restaurant, table for two and everything, singing "I came here to be insulted, and insulted is what I'm going to be" [Laughter] I think there are people who go to films for that reason, you know, I came to be shocked and, we certainly did get a group of three young men who went to this film, oh about 20, and left after about 20 minutes, and complained about things which aren't in the first twenty minutes, so they couldn't have seen them, they had an agenda, and they went to confirm their judgements, I suspect. And er, that was their entertainment.

MB: Did you get much sense of the wider public response?

JF: There wasn't a wider public response of people who had seen it, and, there just wasn't. I mean, we got some letters saying 'Thank you for letting us see *Crash*, it was a very interesting film', some being critical of it but still saying they are glad they had the chance to see it ...

MB: ... yes ...

JF: ... but it used to be said that there is no such thing as bad publicity, but I have to say at the risk of turning Mr Dacre [MB: Editor of the *Daily Mail*] on to go on doing it, that he did have an effect on *Crash* and *Lolita*, two films that I think should have been seen rather more widely, well certainly *Lolita* which I think is a ...

MB: Well certainly we interviewed Chris Auty who was the producer, as you know, of *Crash* and he felt that the film had been very much harmed, not just in the number of people who went to see it, but in the way people felt they were able to watch it, that the film had been harmed by the controversy, that they hadn't benefited at all.

JF: I think that's true, and I think that's the first film where it really was true in a big way, umm, I mean I think *Kissed* was always going to be a tiny minority film, but er, certainly *Crash* was an interesting film, and I would hope it would go on as a repertory film. I don't know how it's doing on video, do you know?

MB: No, it's just this week gone into sell-through, so I don't know how it's done in rental.

JF goes to look up the stats on rentals in a magazine which lists video rentals. A bit of discussion takes place around where such stats can be got as he looks them up. Also some interesting discussion around Starship Troopers and reactions against it being rated '15' at the cinema (seen as too low by many), and '18' for video (seen as too high by others). Crash turned out to be at 14 in the UK video charts, which JF regarded as 'quite high', though this didn't show how long it had been there.]

JF: Most probably curiosity. I think there was no controversy at all when it came out on video.

MB: So you would only know about it, er, wider responses if people write in either saying thank you or ...

JF: ... or through our cuttings service, because our cuttings service does all the local press round the country as well. If anyone's complained we hear of it.

MB: Right – no, no there's been nothing at all about the video release in fact.

JF: I mean, I think what's happened is it's settled down to what it always should have been, an interesting rather outré arthouse movie. And in a way this is what Cronenberg specialises in, is arthouse horror, and er, his subject matter is always interesting. I mean I think one of the most interesting was the one about the twins which got a very narrow ..

MB: .. *Dead Ringers* ..

JF: Yes, very few people saw *Dead Ringers*, even people I would have thought would have seen it. That's what, Jeremy Irons said when he picked his award the following year, he said 'This award is much appreciated, but it's for the wrong film'. [Laughter] Cos I think that was his best performance, and I think that is possibly the best performance now, but I am not talking about that, am I?

MB: No, you're not. I've only got a couple more questions, actually, because in, in how you've answered some of my earlier ones you've kind of sketched over things I wanted to ask you anyway. For example, I wanted to ask you whether you had your own personal responses, and you've already answered that question quite fully.

JF: I did, I mean, gradually in later viewings because I saw it so often, the memories of David Harlech faded away in connection with the film. Er, but there's no question that because I'd had that personal experience, I understood all the people who said you know I've lost loved ones in a car crash and what a dreadful thing to do, to say car crashes turn people on sexually, em, you know, a lot of people have said, you know, several examiners said, Danger is exciting, and in that way yes, any kind of danger and surviving danger, you know, all your emotions are geed up and there's an excess of emotion that could spill over into sex. But nobody said they ever *had* fallen, but they could understand why that happened as a given experience, and you know, adrenaline can very rapidly turn over into sexual stimulation. Umm. I think that side of it, yes, we talked endlessly about this film for about a couple of months, in the early days, and then there was this long long wait for the two reports. And we had some interesting discussions. I think once people got past the initial shock, em, nobody felt we should refuse the film, I mean, nobody could see any real harm although they could see that it would be offensive and shocking to people. But at '18' we have no right to protect people from being offended or shocked.

MB: Can I ask you ... going slightly more philosophically at, what for you is involved in that notion of 'harm'? I mean, I know to some extent you are constrained by legal definitions of that, but when you're considering a film, what do you term ...

JF: There is very, very good research evidence that the rape and response films of the '70s, the porno films particularly which constantly show women being raped and thanking the rapist, having a glorious orgasm and flinging their arms round the rapist's neck and thanking him for this liberating experience. And you know, it confirmed the rape myth that women secretly want to be raped. And there's no doubt that this does erode people's resistance to themes of violence against women, em, and and it just

teaches attitudes. And men of student age, who are in a research population, do have their feelings, well there is a disinhibition to using force on a woman. And this has been compared to a questionnaire which has been set some days before the film experience, what are your attitudes to rape, if you were alone with a young woman and had found you could take advantage of her and definitely would not be reported for it, would you do it?¹³ And the propensity, there is a measurable propensity to rape, some people say, would admit that they were likely to do it, and those are the people who are most easily influenced by rape with a positive accent, I think the psychologists call it.

MB: So you are drawing there on some of that American research by people like Donnerstein and Zillman, and so on.

JF: There is very little comparable evidence on porn which is between consenting adults, em, I think obviously the most obvious harm is child pornography, one doesn't want to turn anyone on to having interest in having sex with children. That's the one that most of the population would agree with. Not everybody, but most of them. There's not unfortunately evidence, which is really clinching evidence about the cause and effect relationships of straight violence, not sexual violence. Em, I think Kevin Browne has done some very good research which is just before the Board, it's coming out any day now, on the fact that given a propensity to be violent, umm, young offenders with a history of offences who come from a very violent household, especially boys who've known violence at their father's knee, and in many cases have very violent mothers as well, so it is a violent household, which is rather the background of Thompson and Venables, they came from a very violent family, and the five brothers passed the violence down the ages, and I think he was just taught violence.¹⁴ But there is that sort of person who will develop a stronger taste for violence and will go out of his way to seek out violent entertainment, the more violent the better, and the kind of violence that confirms and validates their own violent lifestyle, so it's kind of cyclical. I think we have to pay attention to it, and in that case it's heroic violence, it's violence where the film endorses the violence and applauds it, maybe Van Damme, Segal, that kind of violence. Umm, and so we are, we are very careful on that, and will prefer to cut it for '15' rather than pass it uncut at '18' on video because we know that there's no control of age with video. We may control people up to 7 or 8 years younger, the younger but not very young people. Some parents don't take enough care and so we have to be careful, I think I think on the whole the amendments in '94 were probably valid, they certainly don't constrain us.¹⁵ We just have to have special regard to the possibility that it may happen, or the likelihood, and there's certainly so much research evidence about underage viewing now.

MB: What would you count as the most important research of that kind?

JF: Well, I think Kevin Browne's is probably the most important, and he hasn't, he admits he wasn't researching cause and effect, he was essentially research correlation, and the patterns of viewing and violent behaviour that show a probable cyclical effect where violent young people seek out violent films, em, and the violent films tend to confirm and validate their own violence, so they become more violent, they alienate the people around them, they get isolated, and therefore are violent in those situations of hostility and therefore they get ostracised by people and have a bigger chip on their shoulders so they watch violent films to comfort themselves, they (*unclear*). And it's a slow process, I think there is very little evidence that one film ever causes anything, it's the, er, the literature doesn't reveal any case where people take their behaviour directly from a film, but I think it's the drip-drip effect. Even on very violent youngsters it's a drip-drip, it's a slow erosion of inhibitions.

MB: I'm not going to debate some of those points with you, I'm sure we would disagree over some of the points, but I'm interested to know how then you respond, how you view something like the Hagell and Newburn study [1994] which seemed in fact to go in the opposite direction and say that within the routines of watching of young offenders it's the non-violent material such as the soap operas for example or the police procedurals which seem to bulk most strongly.

JF: I don't think they quite said that, and certainly on the last page, they say that er, there appears to be a similarity in responses from non-offenders and offenders, but that it was quite possible ... in viewing, in tastes, but that it was quite possible that offenders were interpreting the material differently, and that's really what Kevin started out to research. But what he found was that the pattern was actually slightly different from Hagell and Newburn, and his comparability studies didn't come to the same conclusions. Now he was quite possibly researching a more violent group of offenders because they were all in custody at the time, em, and a lot of them came from very violent backgrounds, and so he just found that the pattern was slightly different, and his pattern I think makes more sense. There was an executive summary published by the Home Office ...

MB: ... that's all I've been able to read so far ...

JF: ... but the full, the full study is about 110 pages, and it's very interesting. I've read it in proof, and we wanted to go on to a third study, but whether we'll get the funding for it I don't know, which is more psychoanalytic, sort of exploring the fantasies of young offenders to see if there's any way in which images seen through films actually lodge in their fantasies and are used by them on a recurrent basis. Em, there was a study

done of sexually violent behaviour exactly on this pattern, where there were about 50 young people who were, had interviews with a forensic psychologist ..

MB: .. was that the Susan Bailey study?

JF: No, this was done by the Institute of Child Health, and they did work out – I don't think it's been published yet – but they did find a pattern that did seem to predict sexual violence, now media tastes and habits didn't come into this, and I said, you know, you could use exactly the same model of research with media influences, and we may find a way of following it up, and I proposed from Brussels last month, we had a session with the Commission with media regulators, television mostly, but also film and video and the Internet, and I proposed that we really did need much more research, I mean, video games is an unresearched field ...

MB: I'm getting the sense that for you, research is primarily relevant in the way you are talking at the moment, if it deals with the non-normal viewer.

JF: Well, we don't know, I mean, is it a non-normal viewer who is playing with video games now? We don't know, there's no research at all about the kinds of kids who use ...

MB: No, what I'm getting at, James, is that in the kind of research you are reviewing, people like Kevin Browne's and indeed actually the Hagell and Newburn study ...

JF: Well I commissioned both of them, you know ...

MB: I didn't know you'd commissioned both of them, actually, I didn't know that

JF: Yes, well, I got together a consortium of television authorities and ourselves to fund Hagell & Newburn and we set it up, and piggy-backed it onto a Home Office study of persistent offenders, and said could we add ten minutes to the end of the questionnaire about media tastes and habits? That's how that started. And then Kevin Browne who's on our consultative council was interested in the results of that and we talked about doing a follow-up of the kind of thing that they proposed on the last page of Hagell and Newburn, and he said he would look into it. But we couldn't fund his kind of study because it was too long, em.

MB: But what I'm getting at is that the focus – I'm not saying it is a wrong focus but I am wondering if you would see other things as being equally important ...

JF: Well we also do market research, em, what do people feel about what they see, and er, we have a home viewing panel a couple of hundred families round the country that give us any complaints they have got. Em, which are not many. And we use focus groups, we did a study last year on what makes a children's film, and where parents draw the line, which was very interesting, to see what kind of language and what kinds of images they thought made something PG, and so what we are looking for is criteria, what criteria we need to use.

MB: When you do that, you're focusing on what the mothers think their children ought to have. Do you do any research on what the children themselves?

JF: Yes we certainly take into account all David Buckingham's stuff, all his books are in our Library, so we tend to read fairly widely, and we have long, long discussions and we have people coming in to talk to us, David came in and talked to us about children's viewing. And there was a huge study about children's television and films that went on for about six weeks, and we had people coming in and talking to us. We're also very interested in media education and er, we were one of the group like the BFI who petitioned, lobbied SCAA [the School Curriculum Assessment Authority] to get it back on the national curriculum, which we got. And now we're looking at schools inspectors, to check to what extent they are actually asking questions about media education. And now there's a study that we're doing with the BFI on that, which will last about six months, and actually the young researcher who's doing it is joining us as an examiner next week.¹⁶

This ends the part of the interview which address conceptions of the 'audience' in any way. The remaining parts concerned people whom we both knew, one of whom was then newly employed at the BBFC.

What does the interview reveal? Without pre-empting what other readers than me might find in it, it seems to me that a number of things stand out.

First, that Ferman himself and his examiners are 'special audiences', almost like pseudo-academics examining each film forensically – but in ways which try to predict how others (putatively vulnerable) might find meanings, connections, stimuli within them.

Second, that research plays an important but curiously background role in their thinking. Examiners come with 'knowledge' of what to watch for, and how to find significance. But this knowledge cannot tell in advance how to any new film might matter. Research *does* matter to them, but they pick and choose rather like diners offered a wide menu. And at that time, psychological researches which combine individual trait approaches with experimental procedures (leading to numbers and graphs) have a status denied to other accounts. This 'medicalised' view of culture still largely rules.

Third, lurking as a miasmic cloud around them – especially at that time – are the ‘unnameable’ threats of the British tabloid press, with their strong moral agendas. They can’t be ignored, because of their influence on British political culture. Finally, they have a (perhaps necessary) view of themselves as ‘above it all’, able to step outside the skin of their own culture. They are in the end *solely* examiners, doing a job. Ferman’s estimation of the Roadshows – that everyone went away having learning something – confirms his self-judgement that they are getting things as ‘right as they can’.

This couples with a broader tendency at the BBFC to write its own history as one of consistency, rationality, and steady development. This can be seen from the way the BBFC tells its story to students, as here, on the controversial topic of the banning of nunchakus (that obsession of Ferman’s):

1999 also saw the removal of the BBFC's controversial policy on Far Eastern weaponry (most notably chainsticks), originally implemented by Stephen Murphy in the early 1970s but continued zealously by James Ferman. Whilst the refusal to allow sight of exotic - and potentially easily manufactured - weaponry had been a reaction to real concerns back in the 1970s (when Kung Fu films and martial arts shops had been at their height of their popularity), a total prohibition on the sight of such weapons was no longer considered necessary or particularly constructive. Such weapons were less prevalent than they had been in the past (largely as a result of changing fashions) and information on them was in any case widely available in books, magazines and on the internet. Furthermore, the skill required to handle chainsticks effectively was likely to require more time and practice than most potential offenders would be prepared to invest (it was much easier to use a knife), especially for such a 'dated' and unfashionable weapon. Emphasis was accordingly changed from removing all evidence of unusual weapons towards a policy of being concerned about the glamorisation of any weapons (but especially knives), particularly at the junior age ratings. This paved the way for the eagerly anticipated (by his fans) release of the uncut versions of all Bruce Lee's films in the 2000s. (BBFC, 'The 1990s')

Of course, the world had changed! And the BBFC once again accurately reflected the changed circumstances, after thinking carefully about it! Never let it be said that there was politics involved ... or moral impositions ... or simply prejudices ...

References:

- Barker, Martin, Jane Arthurs & Ramaswami Harindranath, *The Crash Controversy: Censorship Campaigns and Film Reception*, London: Wallflower Press, 1998.
- Barratt, A. J. B., *Audit of media in English*, London: BFI, 1998.

- BBFC, 'The 1990s', found at <http://www.bbfc.co.uk/education-resources/student-guide/bbfc-history/1990s> (Visited 13 December 2016).
- Browne, Kevin & Catherine Hamilton-Giachritsis, 'The influence of violent media on children and adolescents: a public-health approach', *Lancet*, 365 [9460], 19 February 2005, pp. 702-10.
- Burt, Martha, 'Cultural myths and supports for rape', *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 38:2, 1980, pp. 217-30.
- Hagell, A & T. Newburn, 'Young offenders and the Media: Viewing Habits and Preferences'. London: Policy Studies Institute, 1984.
- Kuhn, Annette, *Cinema, Censorship and Sexuality, 1909-25*, London: Routledge, 1988.
- Mathews, Tom Dewe, *Censored*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1984.
- Tookey, Christopher, 'Review of *Crash*', *Daily Mail*, 6 June 1997.
- Talker, Alexander, 'A movie beyond the bounds of depravity', *Evening Standard*, 5 June 1996.

Notes:

¹ The British Board of Film Classification has for more than a century held powers to regulate what films are shown, and to whom, in the UK. Founded in 1912 in response to fears over crowd safety, it quickly acquired regulatory control over 'moral' matters – which have long proved to carry political meanings (see for instance Mathews (1984) and Kuhn (1988)). In 1984 its title changed from Board of Censors, to Board of Classification, signalling both an expansion of their powers (to cover video) and a change to an increasingly informational and advisory role. But it has retained, and indeed still uses from time to time, powers to refuse classification to films which it deems unacceptable. The anti-censorship website 'Melonfarmers' maintains a list of films and DVDs which have been thus banned. See <http://melonfarmers.co.uk/reifilms.htm>.

² Tookey was joined – indeed preceded – in this by Alexander Walker, who reviewed for one of the *Mail's* stable-mate publications, the London *Evening Standard*. Seeing it at the Cannes Festival, Walker (1996) called *Crash* a 'movie beyond depravity'. (For details on this and other reviews at that time, see Barker et al., 1998.)

³ From the BBFC's own website: "With the combined weight of legal and psychological advice, the opinions of disabled viewers, and the unanimous view of the BBFC examiners that the film was neither harmful nor dangerous for adult audiences, *Crash* was classified at 18 uncut on 18 March 1997. Predictably, the BBFC's careful and considered decision was not welcomed by the *Daily Mail* or *Evening Standard* although, when the film finally opened in May 1997, it provoked little public comment. The press campaign against the BBFC's decision became increasingly vicious between the time of the film's classification and its release, resorting to publishing the photographs and personal details of the BBFC's examiners and ridiculing them as unrepresentative 'liberals' who had refused to ban an offensive and dangerous film. However, the evidence did not support any of the claims still being made." (Found at <http://www.bbfc.co.uk/case-studies/crash>, visited 13 December 2016)

⁴ See for instance the Obituary for Ferman in the *Daily Telegraph* (26 December 2002), found at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1417031/James-Ferman.html> (visited 13 December 2016).

⁵ The setting of my interview with Ferman was his office at the BBFC. This had a large desk on a slightly raised dais. With other options open to him, Ferman ensured that he sat behind his desk, with me on a chair below his height, nicely marking his commanding and my 'inferior' position.

⁶ The '18' category is the highest BBFC category, restricting entry to those over that age – apart from the 'R18' rating which is used for those seen as appropriate only to films with highly explicit sexual content, which can be viewed only in authorised cinemas.

⁷ These words are important since they bridge Ferman's arguments to the terms deployed in the UK's Obscene Publications Act to define 'obscenity'.

⁸ It is worth noting here that the BBFC has often been wrongly blamed for cuts to both the cinema and video releases of Videodrome. The UK cinema release was the US cinema release which was cut to achieve an R rating. Three video releases also used this version (1990 CIC, 2002 Universal, 2011 Universal), which was cut by a further three minutes by CIC for its 1987 video release. My thanks for Julian Petley for this point.

⁹ James Ferman in fact says 'Lord Harlech' at this point, mistakenly – almost certainly because of his earlier recalling of his influence on him.

¹⁰ For historians of censorship processes this is a really interesting point, on which unfortunately I have no further details. The role of Customs as undeclared censors deserves closer attention.

¹¹ This was, of course, the *Daily Mail*, a newspaper happy to denounce others for appalling journalistic practices, but themselves well capable of them.

¹² This wording, which derived directly from lawyers working with Mary Whitehouse, constituted a key clause in the Video Recordings Act (1984), provided the basis for the BBFC to make separate classification decisions for cinema and video.

¹³ The reference here is to Martha Burt's (eg, 1980) work on 'rape myths' – work which has had wide influence, although there are serious questions about its quality and reliability as research.

¹⁴ Kevin Browne, at this time at the University of Liverpool, has conducted and presented a series of experimental pieces of research, very much in the medicalised tradition of psychological research, on the supposed links between fictionalised violence and aggression and conflict in society. See for instance his work with Catherine Hamilton-Giachritsis (2005). His work has been cited by MPs seeking greater restrictiveness in controls over films. See for instance <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200809/cmselect/cmhaff/112/112we20.htm>.

¹⁵ The 1994 amendments (within the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act) were partly a response to technical developments (the emergence of DVDs and CD-Roms as flexible storage devices) but partly also a response to a renewed moral scare crystallised in a 'report' put together by child psychologist Elizabeth Newson ('Video violence and the protection of children) following the murder of James Bulger which was blamed on their watching of 'violent videos', notably *Child's Play 3* (although there was no evidence that the two boys had even seen the film).

¹⁶ The research to which Ferman was referring was developed in collaboration between the British Film Institute, the BBFC and the Broadcasting Standards Commission, and published by the BFI in 1998. The research made a strong case that media education was valued by teachers but who felt under-supported in their work, and was neglected by school inspectors and their guidelines (see Barratt, 1998). Submitted to the Office for Standards in Education, the research received a cursory reply from its then Head, Chris Woodhead, and little encouragement was given to schools to develop the subject. My thanks to Jim Barratt for enabling me to see this research, and Ofsted's response to it. My thanks also to Julian Petley who read a draft of this article, and offered important suggestions and corrections.