

Pause and Rewind: Memories of Age-Inappropriate Film Viewings in the 1980s

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This article explores some of the findings from a work-in-progress project that I began working on in 2020 to investigate the retrospective memories of 1980s British audiences surrounding viewing films classified either 15 or 18 by the BBFC, while the participants were underage. I question the so-called victims of censorship that have matured into their 40s and are no longer at the mercy of parents or the classifications of the BBFC in order to investigate the retrospective memories of these adults who were once participating in forbidden viewings as children in the 1980s. This article explores Annette Kuhn's idea that for audiences, the movie fades from memory to make way for more movies, but it is the life experiences that stay with the viewer. By focusing on underage viewers and films that had been deemed unsuitable for their age, I hope to review Kuhn's claim, by resituating the film itself as the prominent memory – a memory not replaced by many decades of movie watching since. This article outlines the methodology for the project, before turning to a discussion of participants' memories of interrupted film viewings. In exploring the dichotomy between memories of viewing conditions and memories of the film themselves, this article then considers memories of the horror genre (and terrifying scenes in other genres), and also the issues of watching sex in films, and the impact of parental restrictions, or watching while with parents.

KEYWORDS: Memories, video, censorship, horror, United Kingdom

In 2021, Welsh film director Prano Bailey-Bond made her feature film debut at the age of 39 with the release of the critical and commercial success *Censor* (2021). It is a film made by a director who would have only been eight years old by the time the 1980s finished, and it is set in 1985, when Bailey-Bond was only three years old. Nevertheless, it is a film steeped in memories of the UK in the 1980s. More specifically, it is a film that directly addresses the "video nasties" moral panic^[1] that gripped the UK in the 1980s (1982–1984 specifically^[2]). Its protagonist is a female censor at the British Board of Film Classification, which was known as the British Board of Film Censors until 1984 and despite the name change, persisted with censoring material. The protagonist, Enid (Niamh Algar), considers her role at the BBFC to be essential in protecting society from the harm that films can potentially cause. The film revels in VHS aesthetics, opening with a scene from a fictional horror film featuring a woman running through a forest before falling and being dragged, screaming, along the ground by an unseen force.

[1] S. Cohen, *Folk devils and moral panics: the creation of the mods and rockers*, London 1972.

[2] C. Critcher, *Moral panics and the media*, Maidenhead 2003.

Enid, watching the film carefully in the offices of the BBFC, first pauses, then rewinds the scene, before watching it again as we hear the screams from the corridor outside the screening room. She tells a colleague that they “can’t afford to make mistakes.” Looking directly into the camera, she decides: “I’m cutting it.”

Ironically, Enid is doing something very similar to what many children were doing with the videos that they had access to, and that were deemed inappropriate for their age group by the BBFC: pausing and rewinding. She is assessing the gruesome special effects, analysing, discussing, and perhaps even memorising shocking moments. British children of the 1980s were the first generation to have access to video players (VHS or, less commonly, Betamax). The arrival of this new technology in family homes across the country terrified the authorities, led by a mainly right-wing national press providing what Julian Petley calls a “megaphone for censorious politicians and moral entrepreneurs.”^[3] Kate Egan’s work on video nasties emphasises the impact of these moral entrepreneurs and their positioning by the press, assessing “the extent to which the *Mail*, rather than Thatcher, can be seen as the prime mover and shaper of a powerful rhetoric which would, ultimately, lead to the implementation of British state video censorship.”^[4] The opening credits of *Censor* feature a montage of gruesome moments from so-called video nasties such as *The Driller Killer* (1979) and *Nightmares in a Damaged Brain* (1981). The clips are accompanied by voiceover and clips from some of Petley’s “moral entrepreneurs” including Mary Whitehouse elucidating her concerns over the influx of horror films into the burgeoning home video market. To Egan’s point, *Censor*’s montage suggests Whitehouse is the face of the panic, not Thatcher. This recent representation of 1980s British film culture demonstrates the fervour and furore that video watching, and particularly the possibility of children watching unclassified content, provoked in society and politics of the UK.

In this article, I will discuss some of my findings from a work-in-progress project that I began working on in 2020 to investigate the retrospective memories of 1980s British audiences surrounding viewing films classified either 15 or 18 by the BBFC, while underage. The first stage of the project is complete, having gathered 309 questionnaires from participants between October 2020 and April 2021.

In their work on media law, Geoffrey Robertson and Andrew Nicol argue that “children of all ages are the real victims of obsessive BBFC censorship decisions taken ostensibly in their interests, but without much expert insight into what might cause them harm.”^[5] The approach advocated by the Departmental Committee on Obscenity

[3] J. Petley, *Film and video censorship in contemporary Britain*, Edinburgh 2011, pp. 5–6.

[4] K. Egan, *Trash or Treasure? Censorship and the changing meanings of the video nasties*, Manchester 2007, p. 83.

[5] G. Robertson, A.G.L. Nicol, *Media law*, London 2008, p. 850.

and Film Censorship under Professor Bernard Williams in 1979 recommended that the BBFC “should take account of the protection of children and young persons from influences which may be disturbing or harmful to them, or from material whose unrestricted availability to them would be unacceptable to responsible parents.”[6] Petley argues that the newspapers “habitually invoke «public opinion» as backing their particular partisan causes, but this is an act of the purest ventriloquism: «public opinion» on these occasions is quite simply whatever newspapers say it is.”[7] With this in mind, it is significant to note the many questionnaire responses that suggest parents were not of the opinion that greater censorship of films was needed, even for children. When asked why viewings of forbidden films took place where they did, some responses included “Because I could, my mum didn’t mind,” “We had a VHS player and parents who were fairly open minded [*sic!* – P.T.] about what we watched,” and “my parents weren’t bothered.” One respondent went so far as to state, “watching underage films was completely unregulated in my childhood home, sometimes even encouraged.” Martin Smith, in his work on remembering viewings of *The Exorcist* (1973), follows Martin Barker et al.[8] in labelling this “encouragement” or purposeful showing of a film to someone in order to share the experience, “gifting.”[9] This gifting, often from parent to child, displays a process of film selection within the family that may bypass the considerations of what Smith labels “indirect regulators”[10] such as the BBFC.

My aim in this project is to question what Robertson and Nicol call “victims” of censorship, now that these so-called victims have matured into their 40s and are no longer at the mercy of their parents or the classifications of the BBFC. I investigate the retrospective memories of these adults who were once participating in forbidden viewings as children in the 1980s. In this project, I explore Annette Kuhn’s idea that for audiences, the movie fades from memory to make way for more movies, but it is the life experiences that stay with the viewer.[11] By focusing on underage viewers and films that had been deemed unsuitable for their age, I hope to review Kuhn’s claim, by resituating the film itself as the prominent, formative memory – a memory not replaced by many decades of movie watching since. This idea is explored in Kuhn’s earlier work on 1930s audiences, where she argues that when recounting memories of frightening films, “accounts are precise in their recollection of the images and scenes which terrified their narrators.”[12]

[6] Q. Thomas, *Preface*, [in:] *Behind the scenes at the bbfc: film classification from the silver screen to the digital age*, ed. E. Lamberti, London 2012, p. xii.

[7] J. Petley, *op.cit.*, p. 6.

[8] M. Barker et al., *Alien audiences: Remembering and evaluating a classic movie*, Hampshire 2016, p. 44.

[9] M. Smith, *Remembering “the scariest movie of all time”: A grounded audience study of The Exorcist*, Northumbria University 2019, p. 157.

[10] *Ibidem*, p. 146.

[11] A. Kuhn, *What to do with cinema memory?*, [in:] *Explorations in new cinema history: Approaches and case studies*, eds. R. Maltby, D. Biltereyst, P. Meers, West Sussex 2011, pp. 85–97.

[12] A. Kuhn, *Dreaming of Fred and Ginger: cinema and cultural memory*, New York 2002, p. 66.

For some of my participants, these influential film experiences are endured alone, with the film playing on video or television, and therefore the experience was not about a social act at all. On the other hand, most participants remember clearly who they were with, where they were, and the importance of post-viewing discussions of the films. Watching while underage what the BBFC deemed to be adult material in film, such as graphic sex and/or violence, was often a social activity, with almost three quarters of respondents watching forbidden films with friends and approximately 70% watching these films in someone else's home. It was also seen by many to be a "risky" activity, and one that could give you respect with peers. Smith highlights the importance of sleepovers for viewings of *The Exorcist*, arguing that "children in the 1980s... had a clear film culture of their own" and that sleepovers allowed boys in particular to display their bravado when watching age-inappropriate films. Both the risk and the potential for respect play an important role in viewers' experience of watching age-restricted films. The questionnaires filled out by men and women allow the respondents to discuss why they chose to watch forbidden films that had been deliberately classified as potentially extreme and/or disturbing and only suitable for those over the ages of 15 or 18.

The viewing of these films while underage is a life experience that fundamentally links to a visceral memory of the film itself. Kuhn categorises three forms of cinema memory: "remembered scenes or images from films (Type A memories); secondly, situated memories of films (Type B memories); and, finally, memories of cinemagoing (Type C memories)."[13] From my analysis of the questionnaire responses, type A memories of remembered scenes or images seem to prevail. However, in this article, I will focus on some of the type B memories, where there are memories of both scenes and images from the films, but also significant scene setting from the respondent. This project aims to consider memories of viewing films as both sociological and psychological concerns, but also to consider how the specific aesthetic and interpretive qualities of films are often central to this endeavour.

This article will briefly outline the methodology of the project and some of the findings regarding the diverse viewer memories of conditions of reception with particular reference to the emerging technology of video in the 1980s. I want to focus on two particular questions asked of the participants. The questionnaire included the questions "How would you describe the experience of viewing forbidden films while underage? Interrupted or uninterrupted?" with the follow-up "If your forbidden film viewing experience was interrupted, please tell us why it was interrupted and how long it took for you to see the whole film(s)." This notion of the interrupted viewing is a key feature of video watching, and links back to the ability of Enid in *Censor*, as well as the many children of the 1980s who were watching age-inappropriate

[13] A. Kuhn, *What to do with...*, p. 87.

films, to pause, rewind, fast forward, or stop their film experience at any time. While children have always been able to self-censor films by fleeing cinemas or covering their eyes, this ability to manipulate the film itself is novel to the 1980s children watching films on video cassette. The child viewer can become what Smith labels, the “agent of censorship” [14] with the push of a button.

Finally, in this article I will consider the content of the films my informants were watching, focusing particularly on responses to horror films and the issues of sexual content, specifically in relation to parental attitudes to age-inappropriate film viewings.

The methodology for the project was inspired by the work of Daniela Treveri Gennari on memories of Italian cinema-going in 1950s Rome, [15] as well as Treveri Gennari and Silvia Dibeltulo’s work on memories of film censorship in 1950s Italy. [16] Firstly, I conducted a survey of 309 participants that were all aged 39–50 in 2019. Eligible respondents lived in the UK during the 1980s and were aged between 0 and 11 years old in 1980. I chose this age group due to the particular circumstances of changing viewing receptions in 1980s Britain. The new technology of video entering many homes, the vigorous way in which right-wing sections of the media responded to the influx of so-called video nasties, and the ways in which the UK government were encouraged to respond, all combine to make this a rich era for study. Egan has rigorously mapped “the changing cultural status of the video nasties,” but her central concern is not how fans and collectors “responded to viewings of the films themselves.” [17] It is precisely these responses that I am gathering, not just to the so-called video nasties, but also to all age-inappropriate films watched by children of the 1980s.

The participants filled in a questionnaire with a range of qualitative and quantitative questions. The participants were recruited through both random and snowball sampling. The sample of 309 includes a range of adults with varying film viewing habits from different locations across the UK, and with differing lifestyles and occupations. In order to find people for this sample, a combination of online methods was used, including social media and forums and a dedicated website for the project. The majority of respondents were recruited through Twitter and Facebook with every new participant being asked to retweet or share my call for participants. This has led to some drawbacks; though I did not collect information around ethnicity, I can confidently infer from the names and profile pictures of respondents that the vast majority are white British and that the recruitment process did not reach

Methodology

[14] M. Smith, *op.cit.*, p. 146.

[15] D. Treveri Gennari, ‘If you have seen it, you cannot forget!': *Film consumption and memories of cinema-going in 1950s Rome*, “Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television” 2015, no. 35(1).

[16] D. Treveri Gennari, S. Dibeltulo, *It existed indeed... it was all over the papers: Memories of film censorship in 1950s Italy*, “Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies” 2017, no. 14(1).

[17] K. Egan, *Trash or...*, p. 14.

a significant number of ethnicities that would be representative of the UK population in the 1980s.

The recruitment methods have provided a mix of respondents, but they were predominantly male (79%). Egan has noted that masculine identities can be constructed in relation to video nasty watching and video nasty websites. These sites are where mostly male fans demonstrate their knowledge and the “validity of their right to teach” others about the video nasties. The fact that many more men completed the questionnaire compared to women suggests that perhaps, as Egan has suggested, the “ability to reminisce and recount nostalgic memories and experiences”^[18] regarding watching video nasties (or by extension, any age-inappropriate films) allows film fans to share knowledge and teach others about a critical moment in film history. Approximately three quarters of the sample preferred science fiction and action/adventure films when they were children/teens (perhaps explaining the frequency of references to *Robocop* (1987) in the responses), and approximately 65% suggested that “scary films” were high in their interests. There are also a significantly smaller number of participants (around 5%) for whom romantic films and musicals were among their favourite three genres. Although the sample was inevitably self-selected, respondents represented a wide cross-section of the population in terms of age in the 1980s, education, employment, and geographical location. They were predominantly left-leaning (around three quarters of the sample), and mainly educated to at least degree level, with differences of race and class having not been examined.

Respondents are also asked to discuss their memories of underage film viewing, particularly what the conditions of their reception were (who they were with, where they were, were they interrupted?), as well as the genre of films they watched and what the impact of watching these forbidden films was on their future viewing habits. The questionnaire is used to identify themes and patterns, and to select participants for follow-up interviews.

By drawing on questionnaires with underage British film viewers of the 1980s, and by treating the responses to these questionnaires as memory texts, I propose to look at some distinctive viewing conditions of young people when watching films that the BBFC and many voices in the media had deemed unsuitable for their age group.

The 1980s is the decade of the VHS boom, with Petley stating that by 1989 there were 13.8 million video recorders in British homes, up from 230,000 in 1979.^[19] The responses to this questionnaire reflect this statistic with a significant majority of respondents saying that they watched forbidden films on rented or bought VHS tapes. The cinema as an option for viewing forbidden films is notably limited to underage viewers, with less than 10% of respondents indicating that they watched a forbidden film in the cinema. This might also be due to the

[18] *Ibidem*, p. 141.

[19] J. Petley, *op.cit.*

majority of respondents watching forbidden films between 1987 and 1990, as the number of VHS players in homes was soaring, as opposed to a significantly lower number of respondents watching films while underage in 1980–1983, when the number of people with access to a VHS player was lower.

In response to the questions, “How would you describe the experience of viewing forbidden films while underage? Interrupted or uninterrupted?” and “If your forbidden film viewing experience was interrupted, please tell us why it was interrupted and how long it took for you to see the whole film(s),” I was surprised to note that only 21% of respondents stated that their forbidden viewings were interrupted. As Robert C. Allen notes, the hurried distribution of the VCR in the 1980s rendered assumptions about [...] normative modes of consuming products invalid.[20] Before beginning this study, I hypothesised (due to anecdotal evidence) that underage viewers’ often experienced interruptions when viewing material deemed age-inappropriate. In his study of audience recollections of viewing *The Exorcist*, Smith states that censorship caused an alteration to the experience in terms of how it “changed for participants in definitive, measurable ways by their having the process of viewing the film (and not the film text itself) interrupted or distorted.”[21] Smith notes that participants had to watch the film “piecemeal after bedtime” or parents told them to “look away” at certain points. I suspected that this was part of the normative experience of consuming 18-rated films on VHS while underage. These 1980s youths are the generation that has, as Allen states, “grown up with their earliest, most formative and most common experiences of movies occurring in places that Hollywood dismissively referred to as ‘non-theatrical’ exhibition sites.”[22] These exhibition sites (usually private homes) afforded children more control over what they watched, when they watched, and how many times they watched films. However, it also came with the added threat of being caught out by concerned parents, with Smith arguing that “regulation from family members, friends, schoolteachers, and others central to one’s life means more to audiences than does regulation from the MPAA, the BBFC, the government, and other national organisations.”[23]

While the number of respondents that remembered having interrupted viewings was less than I had imagined, the answers to these questions do raise some significant issues, and the place of viewing and the difficulty of accessing the television is a key aspect of this. In his previous work, Allen had also noted that 1984 was the year in which the term “media center” entered the vocabulary of domestic

Interrupted viewings

[20] R.C. Allen, *Reimagining the history of the experience of cinema in a post-moviegoing age*, [in:] *Explorations in new cinema history: Approaches and case studies*, eds. R. Maltby, D. Biltereyst, P. Meers, West Sussex 2011, p. 42.

[21] M. Smith, op.cit., p. 134.

[22] R.C. Allen, *Reimagining the history...*, p. 42.

[23] M. Smith, op.cit., p. 147.

American architecture.[24] While many American families may have been assigning this designated space for audio-visual technology, the questionnaire respondents did not mention media centres, but were torn between televisions in bedrooms, parent's bedrooms, sibling's bedrooms and the lounge or living room. There are many of what Kuhn calls situated memories here, with some significant scene-setting included in the recollections – references to the “upstairs TV,” or parents coming upstairs to interrupt forbidden viewings. One respondent, Graham Davison, resorted to watching films from the hallway outside the lounge (through a glass door) where his parents watched “their movies.” Two participants mentioned that their viewings were less likely to be interrupted when they got a television in their own bedrooms. Andy Carslaw wrote about sneaking into his parent's bedroom to watch *Jaws* (1975) while his parents watched it on the television downstairs. This synchronous viewing of a forbidden film with both parents and child watching the same film at the same time, but in different spaces within the same house alludes to the exciting but asocial experience of underage viewings. Andy Carslaw adds that his parents caught him watching *Jaws* when they heard his scream at one of the particularly scary moments in the film. These partial sightings of films through doorways and on small screens make for a particular and distinctive experience for the children of the 1980s.

Many respondents also highlight this notion of viewings being interrupted due to responses of fear. However, while Andy Carslaw says he was “rumbled” by his parents for screaming too loud, many other participants admitted that they self-censored, opting to cut their own viewings short due to their extreme feelings of fear. Smith refers to this as a process of “self-censorship,”[25] which he identified when analysing recollections of viewing *The Exorcist*. Significantly, self-censorship is another way that “upstairs” is used in the responses. For example, one anonymous respondent says: “I remember being too scared by *Evil Dead 2* (1987) and opting to go upstairs.” To this respondent, upstairs is the safe space away from the television, and more specifically, the scary film. The *Evil Dead* films had a reputation amongst young teenagers, since the original had been impounded during the video nasties panic due to its “gruelling and disturbing horrors.”[26] It is interesting to consider if this changing of rooms would have the same impact as fleeing a cinema. When children of the 1930s ran out of the cinema to escape a frightening film, it would often involve fleeing the darkness of the cinema into the light of day. However, children of the 1980s were more likely to escape a room of the house for another room in the same house, most likely with evening viewings meaning that it remained dark outside the windows. Matthew Norton speaks of “daring” to watch

[24] R.C. Allen, *Home alone together: Hollywood and the 'family film'*, [in:] *Identifying Hollywood's audiences*, eds. M. Stokes, R. Maltby, London 1999, p. 112.

[25] M. Smith, op.cit., p. 117.

[26] K. Egan, *Cultographies: The Evil Dead*, London 2011, p. 99.

Barbarella (1968), which featured a scene involving “vicious toothy dolls” that was “too much for me and led me to switch the film off at that point and freak out for a bit.” This respondent appears to allude to some agreement with the BBFC’s age ratings, suggesting that the film was only suitable for older people. Norton adds that at “the age of about 17 [...] I managed to stop freaking out and to face THAT SCENE and was able, at last... to enjoy the sensuality of the rest of the story.” The primacy of the film text here is vital. This respondent even capitalises “that scene” in his answer, the “vicious toothy dolls” clearly etched on his memory, and the primary reason for his interrupted viewing. Kuhn also noted in her study of 1930s audiences the “tendency to describe isolated visual impressions”^[27] of frightening films, but the significant difference here is the ability to stop the film immediately when watching on video in the 1980s. This added control may be an effective way of self-censoring in the moment, but it may have negative repercussions, as Smith argues that it can decontextualise the film’s imagery and lead to a child being more confused by what they have seen.^[28]

Although not a horror film, Norton’s response to *Barbarella* suggests that certain terrifying iconography can have a lasting impact on participants. I searched the questionnaire responses for reasons that horror is likely to stay in the memory of my participants. Is it memorable for its gore, for its ability to shock, and for its immediate power to scare a child, and to give them nightmares or difficulty sleeping? Do my respondents remember horror simply because it traumatised them? David Buckingham’s volume on understanding children’s emotional responses to television,^[29] based on research conducted in the early 1990s, reveals that children often had an ambiguous relationship with horror, torn between “distress and delight.”^[30] Buckingham also found that the “experience of fear [...] frequently appears to intensify after viewing.”^[31] My respondents talked of “choosing to be scared,” and the words “scared” or “terrified” are frequently combined with another adjective: as in “scared but intrigued,” or “scary and thrilling and far more imaginative than anything made for kids.” These combinations of adjectives to describe emotional states alludes to this ambiguous relationship with the genre.

Similar to the findings of Kuhn’s study of 1930s audiences, many informants mention “nightmares and waking fears brought on by seeing «horrific» films.”^[32] Many participants mentioned either nightmares or trouble sleeping after watching the films. Some were specific in how long this lasted: “Inability to sleep well for a day or two,” “I had nightmares for what felt like weeks,” “The transformation scene and the

Memories of Horror

[27] A. Kuhn, *Dreaming of...*, p. 71.

[28] M. Smith, op.cit., p. 136.

[29] D. Buckingham, *Moving images: Understanding children’s emotional responses to television*, Manchester 1996.

[30] Ibidem, p. 44.

[31] Ibidem, p. 104.

[32] A. Kuhn, *Dreaming of...*, p. 71.

Nazi dream sequence in *American Werewolf* (1981) gave me awful, awful nightmares for months,” and others are more vague. Some participants suggest that they are still having nightmares due to their childhood horror viewings roughly 40 years later. One participant states that they “found *Alien* (1979) too intense but «watched» the entire film with my eyes shut building the film up to something more horrific than it actually was and still suffering with irregular nightmares about the film even now.” Similar uses of “even now” and “even to this day” are peppered through the responses such as when referring to *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984): “the scene where Johnny Depp’s character is killed by being pulled through his bed permanently changed the way I go to sleep, even to this day.” Joanne Cantor argues that “TV programs and movies are the number one preventable cause of nightmares and anxieties in children,”^[33] also noting the use of “to this day” when people discuss their lingering memories of scary films. Memories of horror then are sometimes memories of transformation, of a change in a child’s life, and it is possible that watching in the home (as opposed to a cinema) will have made the horror feel present and less easy to shake off.

This led me to search for instances of respondents saying that their childhood viewings still affected them now that they are much older. There are many examples of participants using the words “I still...” to begin sentences that demonstrate that the impact of these films have now lasted many decades. For example, one respondent says “I still find religious iconography unsettling” due to a childhood viewing of *Carrie* (1976). Another states that “the only scene that really stayed with me was the dinner table scene in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974). I still find that hard to watch,” suggesting that this respondent has returned to the film, despite their difficulty with the aforementioned scene. Egan has noted that descriptions of participating in watching video nasties frequently take “the narrative form of a male rite of passage (in the sense that such fans seem to ground discussions of watching and renting the nasties within discourses of growing-up, taking risks, and, implicitly, of becoming a man).”^[34] Some go so far as to mention scarring from the films: *A Nightmare on Elm Street* is described as having left “a bit of a scar from that first viewing” and another respondent says that “in hindsight I think they can leave a deep psychological scar. I’m sure *Jaws* had fed my fear of being in deep sea.” These responses suggest the films and their disturbing scenes are as memorable as the aftermath of viewing. Fear intensifies at night, and the participants remember *now* how remembering the films *then* felt. Buckingham also noted that children would often rewatch films as part of a conscious strategy of learning to cope.^[35] My study indicates a range of reasons for rewatching since the first childhood viewings of horror; some enjoyed the “gory bits” and

[33] J. Cantor, “Mommy, I’m Scared” *How TV and Movies Frighten Children and What We Can Do to Protect Them*, London 1998, p. 5.

[34] K. Egan, *Cultographies...*, p. 144.

[35] D. Buckingham, *op.cit.*, p. 114.

seeing how the effects were done, while one respondent stated boldly: “watch it for the nudity, the monsters, the aliens, the robots, and the gore, but rewatch it for the social commentary and all the other sub-texts and undertones.” Others mentioned that it took years to rewatch some films: *Poltergeist* (1982) is referred to as “probably the film that gave me the most nightmares. It took me many years to rewatch it after first seeing it at a young age” suggesting that rewatching may still be a coping strategy.

However, the aforementioned response from Matthew Norton regarding his viewing of *Barbarella*, and crucially, his inability to continue watching the film, or to rewatch it for many years, also raises two further issues - the issue of the content of the films, and the issue of the “wait” to resume the forbidden viewing. It is significant to note that five respondents mention sex in their answers, but the only participant to mention violence says his parents had no issues with it. The five that raise sex as an issue all state that their parents were uncomfortable with them watching these films. For example, Julia Phillipson says that her Dad would fast-forward sex scenes, Matthew Cuss’ parent switched off *The Terminator* (1984) due to the single sex scene, and Steve Creswell’s mother turned off “films with frequent sexual swearing.” This alludes to the many parents that were concerned about what their children were watching, whether due to what they read in the newspapers, or due to their own knowledge, or synchronous viewing of the films in question. Buckingham,^[36] Sarah Smith^[37] and Martin Smith^[38] all find in their audience studies that “there are considerably more mentions of mothers restricting activities.” Sex is mentioned repeatedly as being more taboo than horror, both for parents and children. Many participants discuss their discomfort with sex and nudity while watching age-inappropriate films with parents, and similarly sexual violence is often considered more disturbing than gore. Parents are also less comfortable with sex and nudity as this participant’s response summarises: “when a scene came on with topless women working in a field [...] my mother got very annoyed and immediately fetched a tea towel from the kitchen and hung it over the TV saying «Darren you are allowed to watch the blood and guts, but not the boobs».” It is also significant to note how many respondents remember the position of their younger selves while viewing forbidden films with parents, particularly when sex was on screen. Kuhn notes in her study of 1930s cinema audiences that often informants would reference physical activity when discussing coping strategies during horrific films, “as if bodily memory is primally imprinted,”^[39] and also that some memories were “associated with a mother’s comforting presence.”^[40] One respondent remembers being “cuddled up with my

Sex and parents

[36] Ibidem.

[37] S. Smith, *Children, Cinema and Censorship: From Dracula to Dead End Kids*, London – New York 2005.

[38] M. Smith, op.cit.

[39] Kuhn, *Dreaming of...*, p. 68.

[40] Ibidem, p. 72.

mother on the sofa, hiding my face at the scary bits” in *Amityville 2: The Possession* (1982) and being “particularly uncomfortable at an instance of incest initiated by the possessed character.” Another remembers clandestine viewings upstairs while parents were downstairs and “there was a sense of danger, of being caught. The volume would be turned down very low and I would be constantly listening out for movement downstairs.” Another remembers watching *Eraserhead* (1977) “sideways laying on a sofa with my mum.” What these responses often reveal is a nostalgic yearning for youth, and also a memory of feeling privileged and mature when a child was allowed to watch material that had been classified by the BBFC as inappropriate. While sex and nudity in films bring back memories of discomfort, memories of watching horror often suggest the opposite, as this respondent neatly explains:

Sometimes being allowed to stay up late with my parents... when I wanted to watch some horror. I felt safe and as I say, it was like half of the things on telly were out to frighten people. I still watch these old 70s films and TV series and I watch with nostalgia and it actually reminds me of a time of feeling safe and having no worries.

Many respondents would mention “parents being out” as a reason for watching forbidden films, and the return of their parents being the reason for an interrupted viewing, indicating the risky nature of said viewings. The endeavour of watching these films becomes complicated by these differing parental attitudes. If the viewing is sanctioned by the parent, it is potentially less risky and less likely to be interrupted. In future interviews with my participants, I will investigate if in the eyes of many 1980s children, the BBFC classification essentially became irrelevant in deference to what their parent said is suitable for them to watch. The process of viewing when parents are out, with the possibility of being caught, adds another level of risk to the experience of watching these films. The double, or even triple threat of defying the BBFC, the press and its claims about public opinion, and the participant’s own parents makes these viewings a more exciting experience than for those whose viewing was sanctioned.

Those participants with interrupted viewings due to concerned parents would often have the shortest delays in completing their viewings of a film. For example, Edward Popham notes that “It might have taken three days to watch something” due to interruptions from his parents. Similarly, one participant states that “invariably [...] films were watched in blocks of 20–30 minutes” and it was only “if we were lucky we could go back and finish watching something that day.” Matthew Cuss was less lucky. His completion of *The Terminator* after his mother had turned it off during the sex scene, was “a few months” later. Notably, a few participants mention their viewings being interrupted and only getting to complete the films years later. For example, Alexander Bowley had to wait a few years to see the end of *Predator* (1987) and an anonymous respondent took a few years between turning off *An Amer-*

ican Werewolf in London at a particularly scary scene, and seeing the remainder of the film. Similarly, another anonymous respondent had to rent a copy of *Near Dark* (1987) a year after his sister interrupted his viewing due to the language being “particularly rough,” and Steve Creswell only got to complete *Beverly Hills Cop* (1984) years after his Mum turned it off after watching the first ten minutes of the film with him. My follow-up interviews will explore the effect of these interrupted viewings in relation to Peter Wuss’s theory of priming, which argues that ‘the opening of a film has the function of programming the information processing of the whole reception process.’^[41] I will investigate how participants responded psychologically to the interrupted viewings. For example, did they hypothesise about the film’s ending and anticipate their opportunity to complete their viewing of the films. Smith has previously noted that fragmentary viewings often lead to a long battle to overcome the effects of the films.^[42]

In conclusion, Buckingham’s observation of distress and delight in children watching horror is still evident in the memories of my participants. Delight far outweighs distress, with many more respondents mentioning the thrill and excitement of watching horror as opposed to expressing feelings that the viewings were unenjoyable. However, this could reflect the fact that many people included in my sample count themselves as film fans, and specifically horror fans. The retweeting of my call for participants by Empire Magazine’s editor-at-large, Helen O’Hara, brought my project to the attention of people who clearly have a passion for film, and this retweet alone is likely to have helped me to recruit over a third of my participants. Nevertheless, many of the respondents talk about these early forbidden viewings as being responsible for starting their love of horror, and it is often a love that they still have to this day. This is linked to an appreciation of the creation of practical gore effects, and often a love of film more widely. Respondents mention watching forbidden films that had low budgets, that were more experimental, less star-driven, and that educated them about the adult world and in some cases, even helped them develop their personalities. In many cases, some of the forbidden films mentioned remain my participants’ favourite films to this day.

What many of the responses point to is a combination of enhanced and reduced control. While previous generations of underage viewers might see films at the cinema, this generation would see films on video in their homes, or the homes of others. They could pause and rewind as Melanie Newman did, or even fast-forward certain moments as Steven McKenzie’s mother told him to do. They could delay viewing the remainder of a film if they were scared. At the same time,

Conclusions

[41] P. Wuss, *Cinematic narration and its psychological impact: Functions of cognition, emotion and play*, Newcastle-upon-Tyne 2009, p. 34.

[42] M. Smith, op.cit., p. 137.

these participants were often at the whim of parents and limited access to televisions. The enhanced control that came with owning a VCR, came with the cost of being restricted to the home, a shared space where parents and children must coexist. Similarly, the interruptions of adverts and even news broadcasts during films screened on live TV were uncontrollable interruptions also mentioned by some participants.

These formative experiences of watching films that were deemed inappropriate for a child also resituate the film as the prominent memory, rather than any wider experience of the viewing circumstances. This underlines Kuhn's findings that the case of frightening films is exceptional in terms of memories of film viewing. Watching scary films, or sexually graphic films, or any other material deemed adult and unsuitable for children, often makes the film viewing experience become a secondary concern. The precision with which respondents recall the age-inappropriate films and the specific scenes that scared or scarred them suggests that for these young audience members of the 1980s, the movie has not faded from memory and will not make way for more movies. This is exacerbated by the fact that watching at home on video cassette might not be considered as memorable a life experience as a cinema visit. While participants often do remember who they were with or if they were alone, it is often the film and specifically shocking scenes (many from horror films) that are at the forefront of their memory. These film scenes are often still remembered to this day, such was their impact, for better or worse.

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