'Sadists and Readers of Horror Comics': The BBC, 'Nineteen-Eighty-Four' and the British Horror Comics Campaign

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When the BBC broadcast their adaptation of George Orwell's Nineteen Eighty-Four on 12th December 1954, the response was dramatic. Letters and telegrams attacked the BBC for showing such material, particularly on a Sunday, soon to be joined by articles in the press. 'Stop repeat of Sunday's horror' read one telegram; a letter urged producer Rudolph Cartier 'to read the Daily Express it tells him to drop dead' and noted that the letter writer was beginning a petition to have Cartier 'thrown off these horror plays', while another letter declared the play 'especially putrid and depraved and I hope that you will not again pollute the air with similar muck.'¹ A letter from one D.Hunt declared that 'the persons responsible for putting on the play' were 'sadists + readers of horror comics'.²

This opinion shows an interesting aspect to the response to this production of Nineteen Eighty-Four, which provides the subject for this paper. While there were plenty of responses that supported the production, as well as those that denigrated it, there was a recurring connection of the play to horror in general, but more specifically to horror comics. The importation of American comics depicting horror, gangsterism, graphic violence and the like, as well as their printing in Britain from imported print matrices, had become the subject of a popular campaign, as documented by Martin Barker in his history A Haunt of Fears. Through the later months of 1954, questions were even raised in the House of Commons regarding these comics and an attempt to have them banned, so the subject was very much in the public eye when Nineteen Eighty-Four was broadcast. Drawing upon Barker's work, I will show how the debates around taste and national identity that were raised by the horror comics campaign are reflected in the responses to Nineteen Eighty-Four, and further reflect upon how these debates engaged with the wider culture at the time.

As Barker has shown, the British horror comics campaign is actually a complex tale, begun in 1949 with the British Communist Party and culminating in 1955 with the passing of the Children's and Young Person's Harmful Publications Act. Briefly, the British Communist Party had become concerned with American influence on British culture, and the American comics provided a focus for this concern, one which could be reliably tied in to wider issues of taste and national identity which crossed political affiliations. This was not the first time that this concern had been raised from the Left: in 1946 George Orwell's article 'Riding Down to Bangor' was published, in which he decried American comics' lack of subtlety and focus on exciting, and often science-fictional, elements. He wrote: Who, without misgivings, would bring up a child on the coloured 'comics' in which sinister professors manufacture atomic bombs in the underground laboratories while Superman whizzes through the clouds, the machine-gun bullets bouncing off his chest like peas, and platinum blondes are raped, or very nearly, by steel robots and fifty-foot dinosaurs?³ As Barker notes, the solution to this concern was to move away from the political roots of the campaign and appeal to the wider public, through ideas of Britishness, of heritage, and of good taste, moving from a political problem (American imperialism) to an apolitical solution.

¹All letters and telegrams held by BBC Written Archive Centre T5/362/2
²D.Hunt, 15 December 1954, BBC WAC T5/362/2 page 1
based on 'national decency and higher values.' Through a number of routes, the campaign thus spread from the British Communist Party into the wider public sphere, losing its political associations and its explicit anti-Americanism along the way, while building its broader social support and its pro-child stance. What had begun as an issue of political concern became one of 'common sense'.

At the same time, the British Board of Film Censors was engaging in a similar push against the perceived detrimental effects of American cultural imperialism. As *Variety* noted on 8 March 1950:

*For the second time within a few months the British Board of Film Censors has warned Hollywood and British producers that there must be a stop in films displaying violence, cruelty and sadism. This is the expected sequel to the new wave of violent crime which has been sweeping England. Inevitably motion pictures have been blamed for influencing the gangster type of criminal.*

The Board of Film Censors say they mean business. Secretary of the BBFC, A.T.I. Watkins, explained that they had already told producers that scenes of torture, beatings and cruelty must be cut out and now they felt that they had had enough of screen brutality.

Dr. Clifford Allen, noted Harley Street psychiatrist, in a letter to the British Medical Journal, contends that the prevailing diet of sadism on the films is causing young people to grow up with a fantasy life of violence. The use of American gangster slang, he says, proves that these youths get their ideas from the films. It’s time film producers gave up glorifying the gangsters, he said. You will note the strategies and concepts at use within this article, particularly in the reported letter from Dr Clifford Allen. The media are seen to generate copy-cat activities; ‘proof’ lies in incidental details. ‘Sadism’ is connected to brutal actions, although it is not here applied directly to the people who depict those actions the way that it was in the case of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. And there is an opposition between British and American culture, particularly as it applies to the way that American popular culture was perceived to be influencing British youth. (How ironic, then, that one of the most feared British youth groups of the period should take their outward image from the British Edwardian leisured classes ...)

Considering the BBC’s position as a voice of the nation, it could be expected, in a simplistic way, to be part of this movement to support ‘national decency and higher values’. Instead, it was the BBC that was broadcasting horrific programming, material which would not be passed by the film censors. As a number of film producers discovered when they were considering adapting the highly successful *The Quatermass Experiment* in 1953, the BBFC would simply not pass the project, based on the television scripts, with anything less than an X-certificate, if at all.

Concern about the suitability of certain programmes for certain audiences had long been a part of the response to the Television Service, one which had been mitigated by announcing before a production if it was considered unsuitable for children. The public worry over programme suitability picked up more publicity in the 1950s, as the area served by television expanded away from London. The press clippings held by the BBC Written Archives Centre show that a particular area of concern was the suitability of certain dramas for Sunday night broadcast. The fact that concerns about these broadcasts continued throughout the early 1950s, certainly from 1950 and up to and including 1954 and the

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broadcast of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, suggests that the BBC was not itself particularly concerned with this issue. While the availability of actors who would otherwise be engaged at the theatre had its role to play in this scheduling, it is also the case that more drama was being introduced across the schedules during this period, as broadcast hours increased. This meant that there were other potential slots for these plays that some found disturbing, but the BBC did not make use of them in this way.

As Barker noted, by the end of the British Horror Comics campaign, "Horror comic" had become the emblem which could be conjured at will, a label which groups could try to attach to things about which there "could be no argument". And, in a nominally Christian country, the sanctity of Sunday was surely something about which there could be no argument. And yet there clearly was. Instead of a day of worship, the BBC Television Service presented Sunday as a day for a gripping drama, often something sensational, providing entertainment on a day of rest. Of course, there was other programming on these days as well, some of which very directly served the requirements of those wanting to keep Sunday special. But the presence alongside that programming of these 'horror plays' was clearly a cause of friction.

In addition to connecting to the horror comics campaign, negative comments about *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the other 'horror plays' often also connected to the idea of sadism. This was also often directly associated with the idea of the plays being 'highbrow' or 'intellectual', something which provides an interesting counterpoint to the connection with horror comics, which were considered lowbrow, for those of lower than average intelligence. But this is not as counterintuitive as it may first seem. The perpetrators of these horrors were the intellectual sadists, preying from their vantage point on the weak and vulnerable. Consider that Alan Turing, groundbreaking computer scientist, was accused of leading another man into a homosexual relationship with his, Turing's, university education, equating education and knowledge with corruption. Common sense, of the sort that would oppose the horror comics and horror plays, belonged to the middlebrow, the ordinary person who had some education, so they could assume a position of caring superiority to those without, but not too much, because that led to highbrow elitism and corruption.

Nigel Kneale, scriptwriter for *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, encountered this attitude during an internal review, where a BBC manager told him that they did not want anything upsetting like the material found in that production. When asked what they did want, they responded, according to Kneale:

Oh, something that would cause no trouble nor attract attention. Not too good, and not too bad, but in the middle. The idea of a manager in a broadcasting organisation not wanting programming to attract attention may seem immediately counter-intuitive, but what they really seem to be talking about is attracting the wrong sort of attention. Drama was there to be consumed and then to fade away, not to cause any sort of fuss in the press, particularly any sort of fuss that could damage the Corporation in a period where its funding and potential competition were under consideration.

'Sadism' was about power. In reviewing the script for the Hammer production *X the Unknown*, a BBFC reader commented that it contained 'a mixture of scientific hokum and sadism.' While there are horrible wounds inflicted in the film, they are the result of what

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6Barker, *Haunt of Fears*, p.184


8Kinsey, Wayne, *Hammer Films: The Bray Studio Years* () p.41
seems to be a mindless creature, not an individual receiving sexual pleasure from their infliction of pain on another. The 'sadism' was more perceived as being on the part of the people who wanted to inflict these horrifying images upon the public, people in positions of power which allowed them to do these things to the unsuspecting viewer. And, of course, this was made worse in the case of the BBC, who could push these images into the very home, inflicting this horror and emotional distress in the audience’s living room. Like Dracula penetrating some nightgowned Victorian society woman’s bedroom, the BBC invaded the domestic space, the place of safety and propriety, bringing with it the infection of horror and violence.

Such an invasion also stood against the Arnoldian view of culture, which sought to bring 'the best' of thought and writing to all. 'Horror' was perceived as belonging to low or popular culture, and to bring it into a comfortable middle-class household on a Sunday evening was an attack on the national character. It is famously recorded that one family that had no problems with the broadcast of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was one that could by no means be called lower class. In an internal BBC memo, D.K.Wolfe-Murray reported that the Duke of Edinburgh had:

expressed his admiration for the production and message contained within Cartier’s production of Orwell’s play, he also stated that the Queen herself was of the same opinion. Meanwhile, another memo reported of another meeting with a member of the Royal Family, in which:

Princess Margaret later that evening told me her mother had listened [sic] on the Sunday and advised “them all” to watch it on Thursday which they did. In their view it was one of “the best productions I have ever seen on television.” And so the story goes that the repeat of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was allowed to go ahead because of Royal approval, and that at least one newspaper re-reviewed the production to provide a favourable notice to cancel out its original condemnatory one. The figureheads of Britishness had spoken, so Britain had to change its mind.

I took as the start of this paper a letter regarding the BBC's 1954 production of Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* which claimed that the people responsible for it were 'sadists and readers of horror comics'. This phrase led to an examination of some of the concerns current within British society in the 1950s: concern over British taste, British culture, increasing American influence and its effect on younger people, but also the corrupting influence of the intellectuals, who were perceived as those inflicting their tastes and ideas through their control of the means of broadcasting. The focus of these concerns lay with the middlebrow middle-class, making this a struggle over identity - a struggle which curiously echoes some of the elements of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In novel and play, the dominant classes keep the lower classes, the Proles, satisfied with cheap entertainment, pornography and thrillers, while indulging themselves in luxurious accommodation, where one of the largest advantages is that they can turn the televiewer off. But the hope for the future does not lie with those in-between ruling class and Proles, who are monitored and controlled constantly by the Party, but with the Proles themselves, and the end chapter of the novel suggests that this revolution does eventually take place, by framing the Newspeak of the

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11 Memo, signature illegible, 20th December 1954, BBC WAC T5/362/2
Party as a historical oddity. In Kneale’s television adaptation, however, this framing is not included, and there is no suggestion that the status quo will change.

And so, like Winston Smith’s little rebellion, which was controlled and managed throughout by the ruling masters of the media, the furore over the *Nineteen Eighty-Four* broadcast settled down after words from on high. Newspapers reported that the BBC was ‘reconsidering’ its policy on its Sunday night plays, in a move which, Director General Sir Ian Jacob claimed, was not a result of the outcry around *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, but was related to negotiations that were under way with Equity.\(^\text{12}\)

Eleven years later, the play was restaged by the BBC as part of *Theatre 625*, but that production received very little attention at the time or subsequently. The moment of fear had passed, and the subjects of concern moved on, and an eleven-year-old play simply did not act as the nexus of attention that it had originally.

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\(^\text{12}\) *Daily Mail* Reporter, 'TV to change its Sunday play policy?', *Daily Mail*, 16 December 1954