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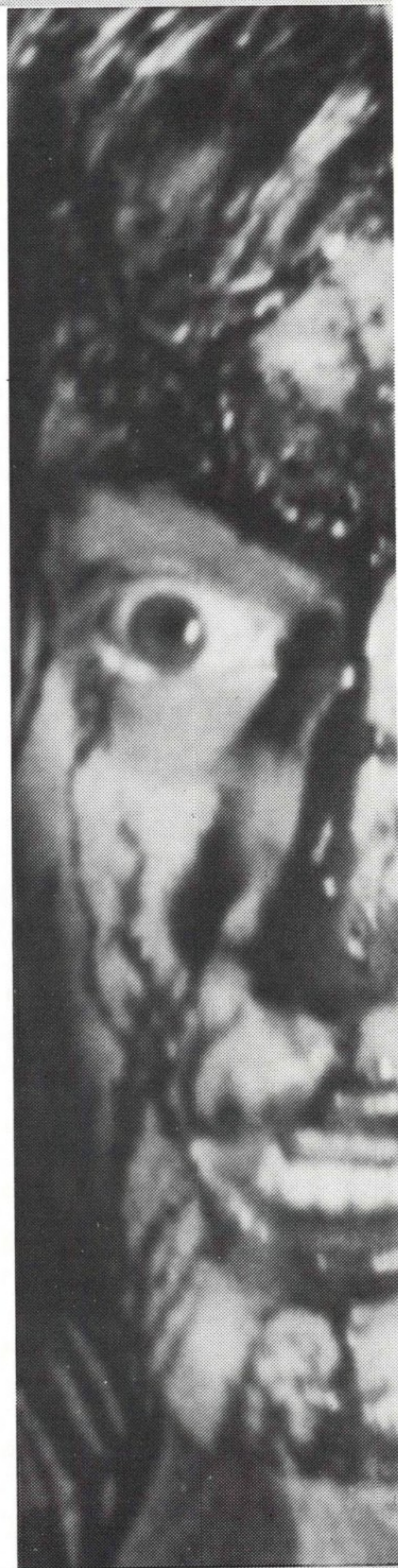
Cutting Remarks

*After a 6 year
ban, **THE
EVIL DEAD**
finally
marches
through
England—
with their
legs cut off!*



I**N THE MOST** important ruling since the introduction of the controversial Video Recordings Act, the British Board of Film Classification have finally passed a "significantly different" version of Sam Raimi's **THE EVIL DEAD** for video release in Britain.

While some attention has been devoted to the recent re-editing of **THE EVIL DEAD** for video, following its six year ban, it is little-known that the movie first fell under censorial scissors before reaching cinema screens. No uncut version has ever been available in Britain on either film or video. **THE EVIL DEAD** lost 40s before being awarded an 18 certificate for theatrical release. According to an interim report by the BBFC, cuts involved in this first re-editing included: removing the sight of a pencil being twisted in an ankle wound; reducing the sight of Shelley chewing off her own hand; removing close shots of Scotty chopping Shelley's legs off; reducing to minimum blood gouting from Linda's mouth after falling on a dagger; reducing the bashing of Linda's head with a wooden post [during the graveside scene]; reducing Linda's trunk gushing blood after her head is cut off; reducing the eye-gouging scene; reducing a scene of a zombie smashing into Ashley's back with a poker.



Report by Mark Kermode

In February, 1983 (before the introduction of the Video Recordings Act), Palace Video released the theatrical version to the video market, with great success: **THE EVIL DEAD** became Britain's top renting video of that year. However, as the campaign against "Video Nasties" gathered momentum in the national press, Raimi's movie became the target of a number of prosecutions under the Obscene Publications Act and, in January 1984, legal proceedings began against video dealers supplying **THE EVIL DEAD**. This resulted in a large number of Section 3 forfeitures, as well as a collection of more serious Section 2 prosecutions. Although many dealers pled guilty in court, believing the case against them to be

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—James Ferman, BBFC

airtight, a few dealers challenged the charges. In May 1984, the jury of a Leeds Crown Court unanimously found Barker's Video Tape Centre not guilty of obscenity infringements. Despite this significant acquittal, **THE EVIL DEAD** was subsequently included on the Director of Public Prosecutions' "Video Nasty" list issued three months later, (along with around 60 other titles) where it remained until August 1985, when Palace Video were cleared of all charges relating to the title.

This amnesty was to be short lived, however, as the Video Recordings Act once again outlawed **THE EVIL DEAD** from video distribution in 1985. Under the terms of the VRA, all movies must be submitted to the BBFC for video certification, which, unlike theatrical certificates, must take into account "suitability for viewing in the home." In effect, this means that videos are judged more harshly than cinema films, since it is impossible to restrict the age of potential viewers once the video has left the video store: young children, it is argued, may thereby gain access to material deemed suitable only for older audiences. It is this peculiarity which has outlawed William Friedkin's 1973 film **THE EXORCIST** on video, con-

fining the film to theatrical screenings in Britain. First issued on video during the early 1980s (before the VRA), the movie was never the subject of police attention, and had a successful shelf-life. However, in 1986, the video was withdrawn to be submitted for VRA classification, and has remained unavailable ever since, due to the BBFC's fears that it may seriously disturb younger viewers. "It's a scary story for an age group with maximum superstition," they explain, "and we've been very cautious about it."

In the case of **THE EVIL DEAD**, the greatest stumbling block to achieving a video certificate arose from the terms of delegation of powers of classification, under which the BBFC is instructed by the Home Office not to pass any movie which *may* infringe obscenity laws. With this in mind, the BBFC refused to grant **THE EVIL DEAD** a VRA certificate, on the grounds of past prosecutions.

"**THE EVIL DEAD** has been found obscene in several courts," said BBFC deputy director Margaret Ford in June 1989. "The position of the Board is that, if something has been found obscene under whichever section of the Obscene Publications Act, and it's got a case history, then it's incumbent upon us not to pass it, because obviously we would be in breach of our duties to do so." Nevertheless, during the first years of the VRA, the BBFC *did* consent to rubber-stamping as 'acceptable' a number of titles which had appeared on the Director of Public Prosecutions' list of impoundable videos during the "Video Nasties" scare. Some of these have been cut to meet BBFC/VRA standards such as **EVILSPEAK**, **INFERNO**, **TERROR EYES**, **HOUSE BY THE CEMETERY**, and the notorious **LIVING DEAD AT THE MANCHESTER MORGUE**. However, other titles on the list have resurfaced *without* BBFC edits: these include **THE BEYOND**, **FUNHOUSE**, **MADHOUSE** and **VISITING HOURS**, all of which were impounded during the moral panic of the early '80s, but now bear legitimate 18 certificates. Although there is some confusion regarding whether or not these titles have been re-edited by their distributors since their appearance on the DPP list, it appears plausible that the form in which they were considered impoundable in 1984 is identical to the form in which they are now legally available. Margaret Ford concedes that the label "Video Nasty" was in fact little more than "a catch-all phrase for anything anybody didn't really like."

With **THE EVIL DEAD** however, no such leniency was forthcoming, and the title remained unclassified (thus illegal) on video, despite Palace Video's enthusiastic entreaty, until the close of 1989, when the BBFC announced that a "significantly different" version had finally been approved for video release. The

newly approved version appeared on shelves May 21, 1990—a full six years after the Leeds acquittal.

It remains an important aspect of the Video Recordings Act, however, that a BBFC certificate does *not* make a movie immune from obscenity prosecution, and a certificated movie may still be tried in court if the police or public raise serious objections to its availability.

How then were the most recent cuts decided upon, and what factors convinced the BBFC that the new version would not fall foul of the Obscene Publications Act? “When we’re in doubt we call the lawyers in and get counsellors’ opinion in writing,” explains James Ferman, director of the BBFC. “With **THE EVIL DEAD**, our lawyers simply said ‘You have to make it an appreciably different work in law; don’t just make one little change and say *It’s technically a different work*; try to look for the problem areas.’ We just tried to tone it down so that if it came before the courts it would be an appreciably, slightly different experience.”

In order to achieve this “slightly different experience,” the BBFC cut a total of 65s from seven separate scenes, in addition to the original 40s of cuts, bringing the total loss from Raimi’s original time to 1m 45s. No scene has been excised in its entirety; rather, the “difficult areas” have been deleted, most notably the notorious tree-rape sequence (the subject of a number of past complaints) which although still present has lost its final shot, in which a branch shoots between the spread legs of a female victim. The censor’s report details other cuts as including: bloody clawing at man’s face; zombie’s wrist being cut; blood from wounds; spewing liquid from mouth; spurting from stump of arm; chopping of body with axe [all the former being from one scene]; zombie’s clawing of a wound in man’s leg which is already bleeding; reduction of man charging into zombie with a wooden post [from the graveside scene]. The movie’s penultimate climax has also been trimmed, reducing the on-screen disintegration of the demonically possessed youths.

“The difficulty with **THE EVIL DEAD** is that the name of the game is excess in the first place,” explains Ferman, “and, in a sense, it’s one of the first over-the-top horror movies. To cut something that’s *meant* to be over the top, so that it’s no longer too *far* over the top, is very difficult. I have to say that I personally don’t think that this film is depraving and corrupting [the British legal definition of an “obscene” work being “a tendency to deprave and corrupt”], but the courts have the last word. A lot of the fuss in 1984, before the VRA came into effect, was that kids were watching these movies, and so when it went before a magistrate or jury they were conclud-

ing that the likely audience was younger teenagers. The point is, do we actually *want* younger teenagers watching this bloody spectacle? I can appreciate that. If it had been absolutely certain that **THE EVIL DEAD** was only being seen by adults, I doubt whether there would have been many convictions.”

So is the Board concerned that the new, approved version may itself be taken to court? “Well, we have to ask ourselves whether we have passed something that could be found in the courts to ‘deprave and corrupt.’ I don’t think, with the version that we’ve passed now, there’s much likelihood of that. Clearly, when we pass something we are saying publicly that, in our view, this does not infringe any

“ Women being mistreated in films is usually the work of immature minds... like mine was. ”

— Sam Raimi, Director

test of criminal law. So, if the courts decide differently, they have judged us incorrect. We constantly assess what has been found obscene, and we get lists of court results all the time. Considering where the courts are drawing the line, we think this version will be found acceptable. A few years ago, we would not have felt so confident because we were still sussing out the land. We feel more confident about where the line is being drawn.”

In fact, at the time of writing, the appearance of the new version of **THE EVIL DEAD** has not been the source of any public or legal complaints, which would appear to vindicate the BBFC’s judgment—it now seems extremely unlikely that any legal complications will ensue.

Speaking from the **DARKMAN** offices in Los Angeles last December, director Sam Raimi praised the continued efforts of Palace Video to release **THE EVIL DEAD**, but reacted with resigned dismay to the news that his debut had once again suffered extensive cutting, and confirmed that he had not been in any way involved in the re-editing. “I think it is unacceptable that the government determines what people can see,” he stated. “I thought we got past

that in the late '30s and '40s. Actually the real problem is not with **THE EVIL DEAD** — the problem is, once the people allow the censors to determine what's right and wrong for them, once they've given them that power, who's to say that a *politically* disturbing picture, that differs from the view of the censors *politically*, shouldn't be censored? The people of Britain shouldn't allow them that power, because they'll soon find out that other rights are being taken from them one by one, until they have no right to speak out at all." Yet despite his forceful and outspoken opposition to the censorship, Raimi concedes that the tree-rape scene "touched a very nasty aspect of things" with which, in retrospect, he is not now entirely comfortable. "That worked for me at the time, but I was 19 when I wrote it. I realize you've got to deliver what frightens people, but some things are too nasty to be used in pictures for the sake of entertainment. You've got to draw a fine line. I don't make that blanket statement for everyone, though; whatever anyone wants to put in their pictures, fine. But, for me, my goal was not to offend, and I feel I went too far. Women being mistreated in films is not entertaining and is usually just the work of immature minds... like mine was."

In the meantime, hopes of **THE EXORCIST** finally finding a British video release remain slight. The BBFC is currently reviewing the title at the request of Warner Home Video, but inquiries to the Board reveal that they still hold many reservations about the movie, a situation worsened by recent press reports of the use of children in satanic rituals. John Boorman's **EXORCIST II: THE HERETIC**, on the other hand, remains widely available...



Biblio Watchdog



ON THE EDGE

The Life & Times of Francis Coppola

Michael Goodwin and Naomi Wise

William Morrow, 512 pages, \$22.95



HIS MASSIVE, UNAUTHORIZED

biography of Francis Ford Coppola — fat with fetid rumor, swaggering ego, and meaningless money — is written from a pathetically PRE-

MIERE perspective. The tone of **ON THE EDGE** is at its most serious while discussing Coppola's most commercial work, paying far more attention to the money spent than the art expressed, shifting to bewildered condescension when its authors are confronted with his more ambitious, artistic and offbeat projects.

Of particular interest is the early chapter "Playgirls, Axe Murderers, Mad Dogs from Hell (1961-62)" which covers the filming of **THE PLAYGIRLS AND THE BELLBOY**, **DEMENTIA 13**, and **OPERATION TITIAN** (a transliteration of that film's original Serbian title — **Operacija Ticijan** — which is never given). While some of the information unearthed by this chapter appears new and useful at first glance, its value as fact is somewhat compromised by its placement in a leadmine of readily noticeable errors.

The authors suggest that the future director of **CAPTAIN EO** (1985) was wholly in charge of Filmgroup's **BATTLE BEYOND THE SUN** (1963), claiming that "Thomas Colchart" was an alias for the ambitious UCLA grad. The truth is that Coppola was the project's "Associate Producer" (his actual credit on the film itself); i.e., he rewrote the dialogue of footage culled from *Nlebo Zowlet* (which

Reviewed by Tim Lucas