

Strong Uncut Version: VIPCO and the Marketing and Distribution of the 'Video Nasties'

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The history of 'video nasties' has been recounted many times in the 30 years since 1984 and the introduction of the Video Recordings Act. However, in this time little attention has been paid to the distributors outside of their role as dealers, facilitating the perceived 'rape of our children's minds'² with graphic scenes of sex and violence. Arguments have favoured issues of censorship and the events that lead to the introduction of the Video Recordings Act, prioritising moral panics more generally and the ubiquitous media effects debates that often accompany the introduction of any new technology. These debates while important, have side-lined the actual effects of retrospectively criminalising a product and the ramifications upon wholesalers, distributors, dealers and consumers in prosecutions that continued well into the 1990s.³

For the Video Instant Picture Company (VIPCO), the distributor most closely associated with the 'video nasties' moral panic, the new legislation governing home video would prove to be defining. Targeted by the tabloid press,⁴ they quickly garnered a reputation as the leading purveyor of 'sadist videos', and following prosecutions under the Obscene Publications Act (1959) the company disappeared by early 1984.

Re-emerging in the early 1990s VIPCO reissued previously banned films, repackaged and rebranded for a new generation of horror fans. VIPCO's recognition of the value in the 'Video Nasty' defined the company's subsequent renaissance, relicensing titles from their own back catalogue and introducing notorious titles previously distributed from other labels, creating a brand awareness almost as significant as that of British production houses like Hammer or Amicus.

VIPCO operated at the forefront of British horror distribution for almost th-

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² 'Rape of our children's minds', *Daily Mail*, 30 June 1983, p. 6.

³ BBFC records held for *Zombie Flesh Eaters* (Lucio Fulci, 1980), British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) [accessed 13 September 2013].

⁴ 'How high street horror is invading the home', *The Sunday Times*, 23 May 1982, p. 7.

ree decades, pioneering the 'banned brand' and establishing a clear market for the re-release of previously contentious material. In post 1984 Britain the stringent regulations of the BBFC would prove damaging to VIPCO's reputation as a distributor trading in the illicit, constrained by the censor into offering films in an expurgated form. VIPCO's product increasingly fell from favour as fans criticised the perceived lack of quality in their videos and DVDs.

Through consideration of historic and subsequent re-releases of these titles, marketing across two distinct periods will be examined — pre-1984 and, following the VRA, the era of certification and compliance to the BBFC's guidelines for 'suitable home viewing.' I will explore the deployment of 'moral panic' as a marketing tool and, through a comparative analysis of pro- and anti-horror texts examining how both seek to construct their object as 'terrifying'. This will lead to an analysis of audience responses to these releases, examining constructions of authenticity within genre film communities and the deployment of sub-cultural capital in the reception to the product.

There is a large body of research on the 'Video Nasties' and censorship, most notably the work of Martin Barker⁵ and Julian Petley,⁶ however the focus is very much on the political motivations of central figures in the campaign and the issue of censorship itself. A number of scholars have examined the textual formations of the video nasties (Egan;⁷ Mee;⁸ Mendik⁹). Where my research differs is in its emphasis on the marketing and distribution of the films and how both the voices raised against them, and those producing, distributing and consuming the films characterised the 'video nasties' as illicit. In so doing, I hope to explore the circulation of discourses, often strategically deployed, to understand how, why, and under what conditions, certain kinds of film are greeted by outrage.

⁵ Martin Barker, *The Video Nasties. Freedom and Censorship in the Media* (London: Pluto Press, 1984).

⁶ Julian Petley, *Film and Video Censorship in Modern Britain* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011).

⁷ Kate Egan, *Trash or Treasure: Censorship and the Changing Meanings of the Video Nasties* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012).

⁸ Laura Mee, 'The re-rape and revenge of Jennifer Hills: Gender and genre in *I Spit On Your Grave* (2010)', *Horror Studies*, 4.1 (1 April 2013), pp. 75–89.

⁹ Xavier Mendik, 'The long road back from hell: Reclaiming *Cannibal Holocaust*', *Cannibal Holocaust DVD*, Shameless Screen Entertainment, UK (2012).