

‘The most objectionable story I have ever had to report on’: Film censorship in post-Second World War Britain and the re-telling of Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Body Snatcher*

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Abstract

*Existing research on British censorship during the 1940s has often favoured the notion that a so-called ‘H’ ban effectively upheld the import, production, and exhibition of the horror film in Britain during the later-half of the Second World War. However, through an analysis of contemporary critical reception and censorship discourses, it becomes apparent how this ‘ban’ was nowhere near as clearly defined as is often argued. While the ‘H’ ban may have succeeded in barring a small number of low-brow fantasy horror films from cinema screens the genre prevailed in various guises, with the films of producer Val Lewton bringing about a shift away from fantasy towards representations of the everyday. Furthermore, the role of the script supervisor at the British Board of Film Censors clearly demonstrates an alternative to censorship through an involvement with the studios prior to production in order to avoid such restrictions. This article therefore presents an analysis of such negotiations at the BBFC during this period, with Lewton production of *The Body Snatcher* (Wise, 1945) representing an example of how horror remained a fixture on British screens, through both self-censorship and a move away from the type of film typically associated with the ‘H’ classification.*

Keywords

BBFC

censorship

Val Lewton

critical reception

realism

the 1940s

Introduction

What has often been perceived as a ban on the horror film in Britain during the latter half of the Second World War (Pirie 1973; Johnson 1997; Conrich 2001; Smith 2005), the removal of any film thought worthy of the ‘H’ (for horrific) classification during this period, was in fact little more than a restriction placed upon a small number of fantasy horror films derived from the Universal cycle during the previous decade, as a number of productions clearly sold as horror remained on British screens throughout this period (Frith 2015). While the ‘H’ certificate was first introduced by the British Board of Film Censors in the late-1930s¹ as a means of appeasing local authorities through preventing under-16s entering theatres exhibiting these low-budget, low-brow productions, the arrival of the latest ‘H’ film would still be met with varying degrees of hostility throughout the regions. As local authorities maintained the right to make further cuts, or even ban, any film passed by the BBFC (Johnson 1997: 138), the decision to deny any film worthy of the certificate a release during this period came more as an attempt to maintain uniformity across Britain during the war than as a blanket ban on horror itself (Hunnings 1967: 142).

Throughout the war period the British press championed ‘quality’ productions dealing with more ‘realistic’ interpretations of everyday life although, in subsequent years, this

confrontation with the everyday revealed itself as an interest in the more ‘sordid’ aspects of society, located below the surface reality of the quality productions earlier in the decade. As the harsh realities of the war pushed cinema into dealing with more ‘serious’ themes, regardless of genre, it left the BBFC with no option other than to accept these changes and relax certain restrictions imposed pre-war – but only up to a point. These more ‘serious’ themes being dealt with in the post-war period, both in the United Kingdom and the United States, were not necessarily a direct result of the after effects of war but rather as a reflection on changes in society as a whole. Once the ‘H’ ban was lifted, and fantasy horror no longer presented the threat it once had, realism became the new target for both critics and the BBFC as horror would now be tied to the realistic recreation of the everyday once championed by the same critics. Within contemporary BBFC reports it becomes increasingly apparent that a number of scripts submitted to the Board dealing with ‘reality’ were in fact clear attempts to move horror away from pure ‘fantasy’ and towards the darker aspects of everyday life. This was also recognisable within a number of productions, arriving from both Europe and Hollywood, which challenged the position of the British press regarding the nature of realism, as the taboo subject matter would often be recognized as somewhat ‘horrific’ in appearance and intent. Recent changes in society also brought about Hollywood’s interest in the development of the ‘new realism’s topical, controversial, and thus-far forbidden thematic’ (Casper 2007: 369), part of an era of realistic, gritty and controversial cinema, influenced by documentary and the crime dramas of the 1930s:

The documentary method and attitude of mind [...] seeped into the commercial feature during the war and began infiltrating all genres to such an extent that it became a distinct type of realism not only practiced but preferred during the postwar period.(Casper 2007: 358)

This documentary method would also be met by an increased appreciation for psychoanalytical themes, in all forms of media, as Freudian analysis came to be recognized as a serious subject for cinematic purposes. During the early half of the decade, psychoanalysis in the cinema would be viewed as pretentiousness by the New York critics who approached such methods with scepticism, typically associating cinematic representations of the psychological, or the psychoanalytical, with either the 'avant-garde' or the 'low-brow' (Jancovich 2010: 49–50). Pursuing psychoanalytical themes within the horror film as a means of providing 'greater meaning' was dismissed as a poor attempt to insert some sophistication into the genre and, as Jancovich suggests, leading the New York critics to make links to 'the sordid excesses of European cinema' (2010: 50). However, by the end of the war, an acceptance of psychoanalysis as a method employed in the rehabilitation of the returning soldier gave credence to the subject matter, leading Hollywood to further their exploration of 'the intrusive, primitive truth beneath the civilised veneer' (Casper 2007: 359).

Noirs such as Billy Wilder's *Double Indemnity* (1944), '[w]ith its scenario of redemption through violence' (Armstrong 2000: 34), revealed a darker side to the so-called Hollywood 'realism' concerned with a quick-fix approach to social issues, and would be developed in the director's interpretation of post-war society in *The Lost Weekend* (Wilder, 1945). With its depiction of the protagonist's fall into the clutches of alcoholism, the film symbolized 'a key moment in Wilder's rebellion against the polite and seemly in American cinema' (Armstrong 2000: 41) through a realistic treatment of the sordid side to society. But, at the same time, the film's creative use of styles commonly associated with the horror film worked alongside this realism, particular in those scenes depicting Don Birnam's hallucinations whilst incarcerated at Bellevue hospital, making these scenes far more traumatic than they would have been in a context of pure fantasy genre. By placing these horrifying and fantastic moments within the

everyday realm, the film is able to deal effectively to deal with the more disturbing elements of contemporary society.

During the period of the 'H' ban, between June 1942 and June 1945, films typically falling into this classification were often deemed incompatible with the lesser 'A' certificate regardless of cuts made to ensure nothing of the 'horrific' remained. As Annette Kuhn (1988) and Matthew Bernstein's (2000) work on censorship has demonstrated, the role of the censor should not merely be seen as imposing restrictions but rather as a negotiator whose job it was to ensure the industry remained free of local censorship. These negotiations demonstrate how the BBFC were not merely in the business of censoring films as their duty was to provide guidelines for filmmakers who wanted to ensure their product made it to the screen without being plagued by controversy and the unwanted costs incurred by making cuts. The function of the scenario team at the BBFC during this period, namely Colonel John C. Hanna and Mrs N. Crouzet, was to offer advice to producers on scripts prior to production as a means of reducing any risk of further restrictions on the film prior to release. Not only did such precautions reduce the risk of costly reshoots or unwanted cuts being made to the finished product, it also gave the BBFC the opportunity to avoid any future repercussions from the local authorities once the finished film had been released. An example of this process is most evident in attempts to adapt for the screen the story of notorious nineteenth century murderers Burke and Hare, as a script based on these events became the subject of a series of negotiations between the BBFC and a number of British producers throughout 1944. By November of that year, at a time when the 'H' ban was still in effect, the Board finally approved a version of the Burke and Hare story as suitable for production. However, Val Lewton and RKO had already started production on their own version, *The Body Snatcher*, adapted from Robert Louis Stevenson's short story, later passed by the BBFC with an 'A' certificate several weeks after the 'H' ban had already been lifted.

Reasons for the film's approval with the lesser 'A' certificate could be seen as a result of the relationship to the everyday often favoured by the horror productions made by Lewton at RKO, as these films were often removed from the fantasy realms associated with the 'H' certificate. Contemporary trade reviews take a similar stance on the film in referring to it as of a higher calibre than other horror films, specifically on account of the manner in which it conveys horror through more 'realistic' methods. This article therefore seeks to demonstrate how the new era of realism in Hollywood became an issue for British censors when dealing with the darker aspects of the 'everyday', bringing with it a different locale for horror. As with *The Lost Weekend*, *The Body Snatcher*'s ventures into the 'fantastic' are revealed to be a temporary result of characters' psychological disturbances rather than supernatural occurrences, thereby situating the horrors firmly within the realm of reality. Horror would now be derived from that which lurks unseen within society, far removed from the supernatural and fantasy.

Burke and Hare at the BBFC

Prior to any script being submitted to the Board, the story had previously made an appearance as a stage play by James Bridie² detailing the true story of Dr Robert Knox, lecturer in anatomy at Edinburgh University during the early 1800s, for whom Burke and Hare supplied the cadavers used by medical students. The only murder dealt with in the story is that of prostitute Mary Patterson and, although the act is not shown explicitly, the death is inferred when her body is delivered to Anderson and the porter (Hanna 1944a).³

Ealing Studios provided the Board with this version of the story for consideration in 1944, with Colonel Hanna's report inferring that a similar story had previously been submitted to the BBFC by the studio and rejected on similar grounds to the new adaptation:

There is not a single good character of any importance in the cast, and no moral lesson to be learnt. Its whole atmosphere is sordid and criminal. I think we can rely on our old standard that the lives of famous (or infamous) criminals are not suitable for exhibition on the screen, and two more notorious figures than Burke and Hare it would be hard to find.(Hanna 1944a)

Mrs Crouzet agreed with Hanna's decisions, reporting that 'the resurrectionists and Burke and Hare murders are too sordid and horrible to be subjects for entertainment, and I do not consider this story in any way suitable for production in a film, even with a "horror" certificate' (1944a).

The objections to the script positioned it far beyond the realm of the 'H' classification. Films dealing with the sordid nature of 'real-life' had always been an issue for the BBFC, thereby illustrating their concerns regarding realism when dealing its darker edge.⁴ While Ealing made no further attempts to proceed with the Burke and Hare story, a new version submitted by Theatrecraft Ltd⁵ entitled 'The Business of Death' caused something of a stir at the BBFC throughout late 1944, as they would be subjected to several resubmissions of the script in the course of the company's repeated attempts to draw the story further away from the real events.

As Crouzet's report on the first draft demonstrates, the new story contained an added emphasis on the deeds of the two murderers:

In this, Knox is married to Elizabeth, and the father of two young children, and Annabella is Knox's sister. He is not given such a bombastic, theatrical personality, and the atmosphere created is one of sympathy for the doctor. Most of the story is given over to the actual murders by Burke and Hare, with detailed

showing of their sordid surroundings and women. The film ends with the hanging of Burke, release of Hare, and the unpopularity of Knox. (Crouzet 1944b)

While the focus upon Knox's family may be seen as an attempt to add some light-relief to the macabre deeds of Burke and Hare, the focus upon their crimes implied within the script clearly remained a primary concern for the BBFC. Crouzet goes on to list a number of scenes taken exception to, including page twenty, 'scene showing raising of the body from the grave', and page 74, 'prolonged screams from the cripple boy while he is being killed' (Crouzet 1944b), while Hanna's report complains:

[n]othing is left to the imagination. We are shown every detail from the first plotting of this villainous couple, through the entire sequence of many of their murders – the callousness and conceit of Dr Knox, the trial and execution of Burke. (Hanna 1944b)

Hanna summarizes the plot as 'a horrible tale of sordid and gruesome crime [with] no redeeming feature and no moral lesson. Quite unfit for exhibition' (Hanna 1944b). The grisly details listed by Hanna have clear links back to the visually explicit nature of films granted the 'H' certificate although, now combined with its objectionable relationship to real-life crimes, 'The Business of Death' became far more unacceptable and unlikely to be deemed suitable by the scenario team.

On the last day of July that year a new script 'The Doctor and the Devils', submitted by Gryphon Films, was described by Hanna as 'almost word for word and scene for scene the same as the one "The Business of Death"' (Hanna 1944c). Coming only three weeks after the

previous submission, Hanna notes the main differences as being alterations to the names of the principle characters and no mention of Edinburgh or Burke and Hare:

The attempt to disassociate the story from actual history and present it as fiction does not remove the horrible atmosphere of a series of most revolting crimes amidst the most sordid surroundings. I think it is nearly if not quite the most objectionable story I have ever had to report on during my long experience with the board. (Hanna 1944c)

Crouzet also describes this as ‘a poor attempt to disguise this story of the Burke and Hare murders’ (Crouzet 1944c), backing Hanna’s argument that the story held too many similarities to the real events, and clearly attempted to focus on the grisly details of the crimes perpetrated. On 22 August, Hanna writes a response to a letter sent by a Mr Taylor of Gryphon Films in an attempt by the production company to defend their efforts to rewrite the script. In reference to Taylor’s letter, Hanna states:

I am afraid I cannot agree that this story is ‘almost wholly fictional’, or that it could be described as ‘a discussion of the eternal fight between good and evil.’ I remember the films of Sweeny Todd and Maria Marten, but I cannot recall a previous one on Burke and Hare. In my opinion, the two former ones quoted above bear NO resemblance to the subject. I do not recall any film based on, or closely resembling, the Jack the Ripper murders. (Hanna 1944d)⁶

The BBFC were in no position to deviate from the exceptions taken to ‘real-life’ being the basis of a film with the intended purpose of providing horrific entertainment, and the attempts

made to present the story as a work of entire fiction would appear to have been the only option available to the filmmakers.

Taylor's insistence led to a meeting with Hanna and director of the BBFC, Joseph Brooke Wilkinson, 15 September, in order to discuss a new version of the script, to which Hanna responded:

Some 24 cuts have been made and I agree that they have reduced some of the sordid and unpleasant atmosphere but I regret that, as I visualise it, I do not think this subject or treatment is suitable for exhibition in this country, or that it conforms to the standards which the BBFC have upheld in the past. (Hanna 1944e)

After once again agreeing to make further edits, both Hanna and Crouzet made their concluding remarks on Taylor's final draft, which appeared to meet the BBFC's standards:

After several resubmissions this script has at last been considerably toned down. Nothing will ever make it an attractive story, but I think if it is played very carefully, so as not to stress the sordid and ghoulish characters of Broom and Fallon, or show details of their crimes, it might just get through. I should be sorry to express a more positive opinion. (Hanna 1944f)

The 'toning-down' of the explicit elements appears to have appeased the censors, yet the presence of the Burke and Hare stand-ins, Broom and Fallon, came to be seen as a poor attempt to disguise the origins of the story. Nevertheless, the correspondence between the BBFC and the filmmakers demonstrates how the censors negotiated an agreement whereby

the story now fitted in with the Board's guidelines, reducing the concern of further censorship from the local authorities. Furthermore, these negotiations also reveal that the BBFC were not in fact opposed to horror, as the 'H' ban might otherwise suggest, demonstrated in Hanna and Crouzet's endeavours to permit the Burke and Hare story, in one form or another, whilst working under the restrictions of the 'ban'. Regardless of the Board's approval at script stage, Gryphon Films would be taking a risk with this venture as the final filmed version would still require approval for classification. However, considering the amount of time Gryphon Films had already invested in reworking the story, the fact that the studio decided not to proceed with filming was more likely a result of the impending Val Lewton production for RKO, based on the fictionalized interpretation of the story by Robert Louis Stevenson.

Val Lewton crosses the Atlantic

Production of *The Body Snatcher* took place over several weeks between October and November 1944 (Lenning 2003: 339), prior to the green light being reluctantly given by the BBFC to Gryphon Films. Stevenson's short story, written in 1884, is set around the time of the Burke and Hare murders, 1827–28, and makes direct reference to the real-life Dr Knox as the professor under whom the two main protagonists were tutored. In this story the emphasis is on two students of Dr Knox, Wolfe MacFarlane and Donald Fettes, entrusted with the duty of assisting the acquisition of cadavers. Suspicion arises when they are supplied with the corpse of a woman Fettes once knew and also when a man named Gray, who is seen having an argument with MacFarlane, finds his way onto the dissecting table. Fettes therefore believes his colleague to be a murderer although he is persuaded not to talk to the police lest he face the same fate. They are then sent by Knox to exhume the body of a recently buried woman and on their return journey her body appears to take the form of Gray's, presenting a haunting vision of an already dismembered corpse.

As an adaptation of Stevenson's literary interpretation of the notorious murders, Lewton's film provides some distance from the real case of Burke and Hare whilst maintaining fundamental details central to the story.⁷ In a similar hierarchy to 'The Anatomist', Dr MacFarlane (Henry Daniell) is the head of a medical school where he works alongside new assistant Fettes (Russell Wade) and cabbie Gray (Boris Karloff), whose role is fleshed out to include a back story revealing how some years earlier he refused to implicate MacFarlane for their crimes, sacrificing himself for his employer. Gray's hold over MacFarlane, alluded to in the short story, results in his death at the hands of the doctor, with the cabbie subsequently reappearing as a traumatic hallucination on the part of MacFarlane, leading to the doctor's fateful plunge over a cliff. A number of brief allusions to Burke and Hare throughout the film appeared to have no effect upon the Lewton production as the film was passed by the BBFC in October 1945 (BBFC 2011) uncut with an 'A' certificate. While the real Burke and Hare may only be mentioned on two brief occasions their presence is felt in the heinous crimes perpetrated by Gray, thereby allowing the real-life events to remain a haunting presence within the film without falling foul of the BBFC's warning against portraying these characters in the screen. As with the earlier RKO productions, *The Body Snatcher* avoided supernatural horrors, with only the brief reappearance of the ghostly Gray momentarily suggesting something more 'fantastic', although, as in *The Lost Weekend*, this moment is explained as merely the result of a hallucination.

Prior to his arrival in Hollywood Lewton began his career by writing a number of historical, romantic and crime novels, and this literary background was used to full effect during his stint at RKO, playing a big part in the screenwriting process for the new Robert Louis Stevenson adaptation. The 'literary atmosphere' created by Lewton would be felt throughout his productions, toning down the 'conventional grotesquery of the horrorgenre'

(Telotte 1982: 25–26) prevalent throughout the Universal cycles, in the interests of creating a more poetic style:

Although Lewton often did not show significant actions, relying instead on the allusive potential of the character and setting, those things he depicted and the manner in which he avoided showing others demonstrate the truly cinematic sense he brought to his many horror subjects. (Telotte 1982: 27)

Opening with an introduction to the streets of Edinburgh, 1831, scenes of civilians passing oblivious through the city streets underscore the film's sinister side, and society in general, as Gray will later pass through the same inconspicuous settings to claim unsuspecting victims. The kindness displayed by Gray towards the injured child, Georgina Marsh (Sharyn Moffett), is in stark comparison to MacFarlane's cold and clinical approach to her condition when he initially refuses to treat the girl, before ultimately being persuaded to do so by Fettes. The girl's fear of the doctor implies a distrust despite his standing in the community, and underlines the need to look beyond façades in order to reveal the dark realms which await beneath. Fettes represents the naïve eyes of an audience brought into this underworld through the bustling streets of Edinburgh, where ignorance permits a safe distance from what is hidden beneath the surface reality. Telotte sees this hidden terror behind MacFarlane's character as a form of 'internal grotesquery' (Telotte 1982: 34) defining the visual as it forms a part of the human psychology, recognisable in the contrast between the respectable front to the doctor's home and the basement in which he hides his macabre activities. In contrast, Gray's persona as the friendly cabman stands in opposition to his small and decrepit lodgings, hidden in shadow at the end of a gloomy side-street located close by to the busy city scenes introduced at the start of the film. In confronting the audience with these horrific

aspects of everyday 'reality', the filmmakers make it more difficult for the viewer to dismiss them as easily as the horrors of the 'fantastic', creating something far more disturbing as a result.

At the end of the film, when MacFarlane hallucinates a vision of Gray on the body of a recently deceased woman, there is stark contrast to the preceding events as the viewer is momentarily taken out of world of 'reality' until later when the sight is revealed as merely a hallucination. The return to reality, and acknowledgement of the ghostly apparition as a hallucination, situates the horrific imagery within similar realms to the visions of Don Birnam in *The Lost Weekend* rather than falling into the *marvellous*, or that which we know to be beyond plausibility. Rather than existing within the supernatural realm of the Universal films, Lewton's films are situated within the everyday, and the characters and their actions positioned closer to the very real ills of society. As Rosemary Jackson suggests, the presence of such non-supernatural 'demonic' figures became a key part of the Victorian literature:

A fantastic mode had always permitted a society to write out its greatest fears as 'demonic', or 'devilish': for the Victorian middle class, these were the threats of transformation of social and sexual mores. A 'devil' was no longer even equivocally super-human: it was a working-class revolutionary, a desiring female, a social outsider or 'madman'. (1981: 131)

MacFarlane is certainly no super-human although he, with Gray forming part of his Jekyll and Hyde personality, embodies the fears of an uprooted post-war society no longer safe from the dark underbelly hidden behind a respectable front. As the fantastical themes associated with the banned 'H' films were not apparent in *The Body Snatcher*, the film did not warrant the same treatment as those deemed to be of a 'horrific' nature and was therefore deemed

suitable for the younger audience. However, the critical response to the film saw this link to reality as potentially far more disturbing than anything associated with the objectionable 'H' classification and its supernatural horrors.

A creepy, horrific period melodrama unsuitable for the 'Highly Strung'

Before arriving in the United Kingdom, reviews coming in from New York championed Lewton's film as an alternative to the repetitive themes common to the genre, with John T. McManus, of *New York PM*, proclaiming 'The Body Snatcher is much too good for [...] the sorry parade of penny-dreadfuls streaming from the Universal and RKO studios through the gory portals of the Rialto theatre, [...] Dracula, in all his gory, was never arrayed like this' (1945). The *New York Times* confirms that even though it is 'certainly not the most exciting "chiller-drama" [...] it is somewhat more credible than most and manages to hold its own with nary a werewolf or vampire!' (J. R. L. 1945). The *New York Daily News* praises the film as 'the best Karloff picture to come in ages', recognizing the move away from the 'hokum shockers' normally associated with the star, becoming instead 'a thing of realistic horror' (Hale 1945). The *Herald Tribune* reiterates these common themes in suggesting that 'unlike the majority of recent horror pictures, this one does not attempt to gain its effect by the simple expedient of concentrating upon corpses' and, instead 'the emphasis is placed upon the relationship between two men' (McCord 1945). The New York press thus united in proclaiming that this film represented a new direction for horror in dealing with its subject with a realism not often seen in the genre, with the choice of the psychological over explicit visuals being instrumental in this shift.

The BBFC's initial concerns regarding the reimagining of the infamous crimes perpetrated by the resurrectionists, became the key selling point for the British trade press in a similar manner to the New York reviews. After listing *The Body Snatcher* in the 'horror' category,

Monthly Film Bulletin was in no doubt as to the film's principal appeal, describing it as '[d]efinitely not a film for the highly strung or over imaginative' as a result of the 'grim and macabre atmosphere [...] well maintained throughout the film' (G. M. D. 1945: 131). Henry Daniell's performance as MacFarlane, in scenes depicting the growing tension between the doctor and Gray, is singled out as being crucial 'in bringing to life this story' (G. M. D. 1945: 131), thereby elevating these strained performances of villainy over the 'highly-coloured' theatricality typically associated with Lugosi, whose small role is deemed to be of little significance.

Kinematograph Weekly categorizes the film as 'creepy' and a 'shocker', terms typically associated with horror during this period, before going on to position the adaptation of Robert Louis Stevenson's 'famous essay in the macabre' alongside other respectable period productions based on literary classics, such as Stevenson's own 'The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde' (Anon. 1945: 33). This respectability was also seen in the film's psychological themes, producing 'excellently timed and executed thrills' and addressing 'Grand Guignol to the audience's intelligence and reason' particularly through the 'sensibly discussed and diagnosed' condition of the 'border-line cases' MacFarlane and Gray (Anon. 1945: 33). The successful treatment of this psychological horror brings the reviewer to recommend this true 'part of history' as 'a cut above the average horror picture', although with the prerequisite amount of 'grisly but exciting drama' (Anon. 1945: 33).

The commitment to realism through historical accuracy is acknowledged by *Today's Cinema* which lists the film as a '[p]eriod melodrama' with a 'well sustained' recreation of the time, marred only by 'the unfortunate and by no means infrequent intrusion of strong American accents' (J. G. W. 1945: 12). The performances of British expats Karloff and Daniell may have been let down by Russell Wade and his fellow cast, yet the review indicates a positive response to the film as an honest representation of late-Georgian era

Edinburgh. Regardless of the implication that the ‘total dramatic impression’ is somewhat hampered by moments of ‘sheer absurdity’, most likely in reference to the apparition of Gray at the end of the film, the treatment successfully ‘provides moments of genuine suspense in [the] heartless murder of [the] harmless street singer’ and scenes depicting the operation upon the young girl (J. G. W. 1945: 12). Tellingly, the reviewer highlights two moments wherein suggestion, as opposed to the visually explicit, plays a key function in developing suspense and horror outside the realms of the ‘fantastic’. The former is a brief sequence of Gray riding his cab as he follows the singing girl out of shot before her voice is cut off abruptly, while the similarly short sequence of the operation lasts no longer than a few seconds and yet the image of the young girl’s small figure on the surgeon’s table provides a suitably macabre moment. What the response to *The Body Snatcher* from the trade press demonstrates is a clear preference for the type of horror derived from the realms of reality over fantasy, with an emphasis upon restraint over the explicit whatever the context might be.

Conclusion

What these reviews for *The Body Snatcher* illustrate is how both sides of the Atlantic displayed an admiration for a film clearly sold as ‘horror’ which utilized both psychological and realist methods in order to appeal to the viewer’s intellect, whilst bringing with it the necessary thrills required by the genre. In suggesting that the realist treatment provides something far more terrifying than the supernatural horrors that preceded it, the reviews also reveal how the film managed to circumvent the restrictions imposed by the ‘H’ classification in toning-down the ‘highly coloured’ visuals of the ‘low-brow’.

The complications created by the BBFC in approving a script of the Burke and Hare story demonstrate some of the concerns shown by the censors and critics alike following the release of *The Body Snatcher*, as ‘realism’ presented the Board with similarly complicated

issues surrounding the ban on 'H' films. Even though the 'quality' realist films of the war years were championed in the critical press as the epitome of British film production, the use of realism as a means of confronting social issues was a far more complex matter and could involve far more horrific issues than those found in 'H' rated horror films with a supernatural backdrop. . As the war came to an end, realism maintained its presence on British screens, but increasingly through an engagement with gritty and shocking contemporary, eventually forcing the BBFC to rethink film classification in the United Kingdom by introducing the 'X' certificate in 1951.

The supernatural horrors banished by the 'H' ban would soon be released back into the British market, as the concerns surrounding the 'H' no longer remained as significant for the Board and the local authorities. The prestige brought to *The Body Snatcher*, through historical accuracy and literary origins in the context of a story of psychological manipulation, demonstrated that the 'horrific' was no longer reserved for themes of the supernatural. Lewton's film clearly marks a significant shift in the perception of what would be considered as horror in the future, moving from Universal's monsters to the disturbing images evoked though mere suggestion of something far more sinister. However, the praise bestowed upon the realistic approach taken to Lewton's film did not spark any new horror cycle as the previous decade had. As the 'low-brow' productions held back by the 'H' ban slowly vanished from the screens towards the end of the decade, elements of the genre remained within horrific glimpses at the dark side of reality seen in 'social problem' films such as *The Lost Weekend* and *The Snake Pit*. Critics and censors alike now recognized the horror prevalent in depictions of post-war society, particularly through themes of the psychological and mental illness.

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Notes

¹Up until this point the BBFC certified films as either universal ('U') for all, or for 16 years or older unless accompanied by an adult ('A').

²At the Lyceum theatre, Edinburgh, in July 1930. Bridie would later go on to work with Alfred Hitchcock during the late 1940s.

³ The play itself was adapted for television in 1956 with its original title starring Alistair Sim as Knox and George Cole as his assistant, Dr Walter Anderson.

⁴ For examples of how the BBFC discussed the influence of crime films on children and other susceptible audiences, see Sarah J. Smith (2005).

⁵Theatrecraft Ltd. would go on to produce James Mason in *The Seventh Veil*.

⁶ Marie Adelaide Belloc Lowndes' 1913 novel *The Lodger*, influenced by the Jack the Ripper murders, had been adapted for the screen in 1927, 1932 and 1944 (by Alfred Hitchcock, Maurice Elvey, and John Brahm respectively). Colonel Hanna's suggestion that he recalls no film 'closely resembling' the murders suggests previous efforts to depict real-life crimes had provided enough distancing from their reality for them to be approved by the BBFC (Hanna 1944d).

⁷ The script for the film is credited to Phillip MacDonald, who also worked on the script for Hitchcock's *Rebecca* (1940), and Val Lewton himself under the pseudonym Carlos Keith.