



The 15th British Silent Film Festival



WHAT THE SILENT CENSOR SAW

Screening: Friday 20 April, 5.30pm

'What the Silent Censor Saw' - 100 years of the BBFC

"From the first day of business in 1913 all submissions to the BBFC were re-recorded by hand in our registers (and this continued up until the mid-1990s when new computer systems were introduced). *Maisie's Marriage*, one of the films that will be discussed and illustrated at the British Silent Film Festival, was submitted in 1923. Based on the 1918 book 'Married Love', by Dr. Marie Stopes, it was a controversial film which attempted to delicately explore the subject of birth control, in part through the use of euphemism-driven images of babies, rose gardens and pruning. Initially submitted with the title 'Married Love' the film was cut in order to limit the birth control references, plus had a title change to 'Maisie's Marriage'. The register notes that 880ft of the 5570ft submitted was deleted (which equates to approximately 14 minutes of an 85 minute film being cut), subtitles were altered and that, with the title change, the film was given an A certificate (more suitable for adults).

BBFC Education Officer Lucy Brett will be appearing with Bryony Dixon, Curator of Silent Film at the BFI, to discuss 'What the Silent Censor Saw'.

With extracts from 'problem' films

Damaged Goods (1919) the problems of passing on venereal disease contracted during the extraordinary circumstances of the First World War.

Cocaine (1922) Graham Cutt's startling exposé of the drug trade in London night clubs.

Maisie's Marriage (1923) based on Marie Stopes groundbreaking work 'Married Love' this is a cautionary tale about unplanned pregnancies based on one girl's fear of following in her mother's footsteps.

Face on the Barroom Floor (1915) Drunkenness portrayed by Charlie Chaplin

Billy's Burglar (1913) thou shalt not instruct the young in the ways of braking and entering.

Spanish Bullfight (1897) the treatment of animals - an early problem for the British censor.

Cut it Out: a Day in the Life of a Film Censor (1925) funny spoof of the man with the scissors - a dead ringer for Mark Gatiss.

A Brief Note on *Cocaine*

Graham Cutts' film, *Cocaine*, was trade-shown on May 8th, 1922, and caused significant controversy and confusion. Reviewed amidst huge press interest, nearing the level of moral panic, concerning the effects of drug trafficking in

INTRODUCED
BY LUCY
BETTS OF
THE BBFC
AND BRYONY
DIXON OF
THE BFI

CREATIVE
ENGLAND





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Britain, the *Kinematograph Weekly* admitted somewhat grudgingly that the film was ‘sensation-mongering’, particularly regarding its exploitative title and the way in which the film – a heavily moralistic tale, mind, of the dangers of drugs – traded upon the press outcry over the effects of substance abuse (*Kinematograph Weekly*, ‘Censorship’, May 18th 1922). The trade press reviews for the film were enthusiastic; *The Bioscope* review of May 11th 1922, for example, commented that ‘[n]o trouble has been spared to make this production a good one, and, in spite of the somewhat morbid suggestion of the title, it succeeds in offering excellent entertainment.. [T]here can be no doubt that *Cocaine* will draw big crowds and will also satisfy them’. *Kinematograph Weekly* took a similar stance, but there can be no doubt that, in their advice to cinemas, the trade paper’s enthusiasm for the film was based upon its exploitation possibilities. They issued the following advice:

BOOM THE TITLE

With the interest being taken in the drug traffic at the moment the title offers the best advertisement angle... Stress the moral of the tale, and its British origin.

(*Kinematograph Weekly* review, May 11th 1922)

Despite these impressive notices, and Cutts’ focus upon the moral dangers of drug-taking, the BBFC – led by T. P. O’Connor – banned the film. O’Connor justified the ban by stating that the film could “excite curiosity in a form of vice that is at present practically confined to a

very small proportion of the community.” (*Kinematograph Weekly*, ‘The Cocaine Ban’, May 18th 1922) However, the BBFC’s role as a trade body, rather than a state censor, allowed for local Watch Committees to ignore O’Connor’s recommendation. *Kinematograph Weekly* indicate the confusion surrounding the film’s release:

[I]n contrast to T. P. O’Connor’s view that public opinion is on his side, the actions of the various watch committees is eloquent. Manchester Watch Committee (an anything but unduly broad-minded body) is raising no objection to the film; Coventry Watch Committee, Cardiff Watch Committee, and Salford (Manchester) Watch Committee have all passed the film, which is also being shown in Glasgow. The situation is that exhibitors in many districts outside the L.C.C. area may be screening a banned film by the simple process of showing it first to the chief constable and obtaining his approval.

(*Kinematograph Weekly*, Ibid.)

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