RELIABILITY, QUALITY, AND A REPUTATION FOR GREAT ENTERTAINMENT: THE PROMOTIONAL STRATEGIES OF BRITAIN’S EARLY VIDEO DISTRIBUTORS, BEYOND THE VIDEO NASTIES

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The pre-digital, “tangible phase” of video has received a considerable amount of academic attention in recent years. A number of books, including Fredrick Wasser’s *Veni, Vidi, Video: The Hollywood Empire and the VCR*, Paul McDonald’s *Video and DVD Industries*, Joshua Greenberg’s *From Betamax to Blockbuster: Video Stores and the Invention of Movies on Video*, Michael Z. Newman’s *Video Revolutions: On the History of a Medium*, and Daniel Herbert’s *Videoland: Movie Culture at the American Video Store*, have shed light on the rise of pre-recorded video entertainment, from the 1980s to the present day. However, even though these studies give considerable attention to the earliest years of the “video revolution”, they achieve this largely by focusing on the North American context. By comparison, very little academic work exists on the earliest days of the video business in Britain, beyond the “video nasties” controversy and the legacies of the Video Recordings Act 1984 (Barker; Egan; Kendrick; Petley *Film and Video*).

This tendency to focus on the video nasties extends into popular culture more broadly, and is evidenced most notably by a number of illustrated “coffee table” books “produced under the purview of recognized cultural intermediaries on the video-nasty era” (McKenna 123). Having emerged from the British horror film fan community, volumes such as *Shock! Horror! Astounding Artwork from the Video Nasty Era*, *Art of the Nasty*, *Video Nasties*, and *Video Nasties 2*,[[1]](#endnote-1) function as overviews of video’s earliest years in the UK. However, such works ultimately romanticize histories of Britain’s independent video distributors, characterizing these companies as “brash and out for profit” (Wingrove and Morris) on account of having employed sensational marketing techniques to promote “outrageous videos” (Fenton et al.). Although attempts have been made to deviate from the video nasties narrative, by presenting more balanced accounts of the early video period (Kerekes and Slater 7-23; Upton), discussion typically returns to banned videos and the so-called “opportunistic” independent distributors whose legacies have been defined by them (Upton 24-5).[[2]](#endnote-2)

By diverting attention from the video nasties, this article seeks to redress the balance, granting Britain’s first independent video distributors more scrutiny than they have yet been afforded in academic and popular writing. The article wishes neither to underplay the historical importance of the video nasties panic or the VRA nor the impact they continue to exert on Britain’s legal and cultural landscape (Weir and Dunne; Kendrick). Instead, while recognizing that “video nasty” continues to resonate as an era-defining “cultural concept” within and beyond academia (Egan 6), I maintain that such a concentrated focus on this area fails to account for the wider business practices of contemporaneous video distributors, or the ways that their managing directors sought to present themselves to the new VCR-owning public in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Whereas violent horror films were widely available and were popular with British audiences, this article, by closely analyzing original advertisements, catalogues, and articles in the trade and consumer press, shows how Britain’s earliest video distributors, many of which are now solely remembered for their “highly infamous” video nasty marketing campaigns (Ibid. 47), were most often concerned with targeting a broader audience than otherwise suggested. Consequently, most would often present less reputable genres such as horror and sex films as peripheral to more palatable fare such as comedies, action movies, Hollywood classics, and family films. It was in fact commonplace for these independent companies to affect the statuses of their major competitors through the adoption of promotional strategies designed to present themselves as professional, legitimate, and catering to all tastes.

“FOR THE CHOOSEY … MORE CHOICE: VARIETY AND VIDEO’S UNKNOWN AUDIENCES

The first of Britain’s video distributors emerged in the late 1970s from a mix of backgrounds. Some had been working with video technology in a variety of contexts for a number of years (providing video projection to discothèques, for instance), while others already had established reputations in the home entertainment sector as distributors of Super-8 films. Others had backgrounds in theatrical distribution. Some had no business experience at all. All were (initially, at least) independently owned and operated.

The lack of corporate infrastructure and the generally “chaotic” nature of the unchartered video industry meant that there were no systems in place to monitor the taste preferences of those early adopters of the VCR (Wade *Film, Video and Television* 24). This “total absence of meaningful research” would continue into the early 1980s (Parry qtd in Moore 36). Accordingly, Britain’s earliest video distributors were left with little choice but to take gambles on various kinds of film and genres as a means of assessing what types of pre-recorded material (if any) new VCR owners might be interested in renting or purchasing outright. It was therefore very important in these early days of uncertainty for video companies to aim for broad appeal and stock as wide a range of titles as possible.[[3]](#endnote-3)

This was true of Intervision, a company nowadays celebrated in cult film circles for having distributing two video nasties, *Exposé* (Clarke 1976) and *The Cannibal Man* (de la Iglesia 1972), but which upon entering the pre-recorded videocassette industry in the 1970s was a true pioneer with wide-ranging commercial interests.[[4]](#endnote-4) It was the first distributor to offer a comprehensive range of pre-recorded films on Betamax, VHS, and V-2000 (having handled a number of feature films, playable and projectable from Philips VCRs, since 1974),[[5]](#endnote-5) the first to establish a video rental membership club (in 1978), and the first independent to make serious inroads into the mainstream. By 1980, it was the UK’s “leading distributor of videocassettes”, an accolade earned in no small part by the varied range of product it had offered its club membership since its inception (Anon. “Intervision on Top” 106).

Indicative of Intervision’s early ambition is the company’s first brochure published in 1979, which features approximately 170 individual titles, around 120 of which are feature-length movies in different genres. “Whatever your taste in entertainment”, an early print advert for the catalogue confidently proclaimed; “we’ve got the movie for you” (Intervision Untitled Trade Advertisement A). To an extent, such hyperbole was justified. At the time, Intervision’s range of cassettes was unrivalled because the six or seven other distributors in operation specialized in non-fiction “special interest” titles.[[6]](#endnote-6) As a result, the catalogue itself became of note to the consumer press, with one journalist encouraging consumers “to ponder [it] with anticipation if not with awe” because of the diverse selection on offer (Cassini 60).

Intervision projected versatility to its prospective customers through the catalogue’s design and layout; the illustration adorning the front cover is indicative of this, depicting an assortment of characters, some of which resemble celebrities. The inclusion of a pirate, a material artist, and futuristic superhero, alongside an image of a rock singer which resembles Mick Jagger and two that resemble Orson Welles and Peter Cushing respectively, hint at the generic diversity of the catalogue’s content and, by extension, its chances of attracting numerous demographics (see Figure 1). The rhetoric employed in the introductory section reinforces the eclecticism intimated by the cover-image. “Now for the first time in Britain”, the opening sentence reads, “owners of video cassette recorders have a library of exciting films to choose from” (Intervision Catalogue). “[E]verything” is promised, from “sensational Concerts to Chess and Fishing” to “Classical films. Horror films. Rock films. Children’s films,” as well as “Westerns” and “some adult films” (Ibid.). Several noteworthy titles are singled out to give a further flavor of the range and quality on offer, including, for example, the art-house film *Blow Out* (Ferrari 1973), the action-adventure film *Sunday in the Country* (Trent 1974), Orson Welles’ adaptation of *Macbeth* (1948), and the science fiction film *The Day the Earth Caught Fire* (Guest 1961), which are collectively labelled as “great movies” (Ibid.). The remainder of the catalogue is subdivided by genre. Each section includes short plot summaries occasionally accompanied by illustrations employed to evoke the content and tone of the film in question, by representing particularly dynamic and thrilling scenes. Examples include the listing for the action adventure film *Paid with Bullets* (Diamante 1969), which shows a gun-toting gangster; the listing for the adult film *Wonder Wall* (Massot 1968) which shows a man and woman in a sexual embrace; and the listing for *Alaska Wilderness Adventure* (Meader 1978), which shows a family aboard a canoe dressed in winter furs with expressions of excitement and delight on their faces. Knowingly comprehensive— “you’ve several hundred quality movies to choose from”—the catalogue emphasizes a range of entertainment crafted to appeal, as its front matter declares, to “*people of all ages*, of different tastes and interests” (emphasis added). This includes films and programs which appeal to individual tastes (such as those with a fondness for Chess and Fishing) and specific age groups (as the “adults only” section attests), but also, and perhaps most significantly, material included to “capture the *entire family’s* imagination” (Ibid. [emphasis added]).

**Inset Figure 1 here**

Intervision’s mode of address, as a company that could cater to everyone, extended across the spectrum of new video distributors that followed. For example, Mountain Video promoted a range of genres, including science fiction, adult, westerns, and comedies, to “keep all the family entertained” (Mountain Video Untitled Trade Advertisement A; Untitled Trade Advertisement B), while Derann offered “a superb range of video entertainment” including “many movies you will want to own, to enjoy with your family and friends” (Derann Audio Visual Catalogue: 4th edition). Similarly, Video Unlimited promised to cater to “a wide spectrum of popular tastes” with its range of “thrillers”, “Hollywood classics”, and “dramas” (see Video Unlimited), and Hokushin offered “the choosey… more choice,” in a catalogue comprising “War Epics, Westerns, Adult, Horror, Crime, Childrens [sic.] adventure, in fact something for everyone” (Hokushin Untitled Trade Advertisement B; see Figure 2).

**[Insert Figure 2 here]**

Trading in variety proved good business. As early as May 1979, Intervision’s company directors Richard Cooper and Mike Tenner were bragging to the consumer press that they had sold 2000 cassettes in less than a year and were continuing to rent an average of 300 cassettes to their club membership on a monthly basis (Anon. “Business is Booming” 45, 65). Later in the year, an advert published in the trade journal *Screen International* claimed that the company was selling 10,000 cassettes per month, having established relationships with 370 dealers to trade in its product (Intervision Untitled Trade Advertisement B). By 1980 it became the first of the British independents to strike a deal with a major American film studio, United Artists, to distribute some of its most prestige films from recent decades, including *Rocky* (Avildsen 1976), *Annie Hall* (Allen 1977), *Last Tango in Paris* (Bertolucci 1972), and *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* (Leone 1968) (Anon. “Intervision in UA” 1). From mid-1981, having gone public, the company went on to clear £437k in pre-tax profits during a six-month period: heights that, until then, were unprecedented for any independent British video distributor (Anon. “Intervision’s Big” 3). Other companies such as HVP, Hokushin, and Derann, though ultimately not as successful as Intervision, would grow and enjoy prosperity over the next couple of years (on HVP see Anon. “Freshen”; on Hokushin see White; on Derann see Dean “The Cover-up”).

The accomplishments of Intervision and its contemporaries encouraged the establishment of yet more independent distributors, all boasting eclectic catalogues.[[7]](#endnote-7) However, as the video market began to rationalize in mid-1982—due in part to the boom in independents, but also to the rise in video wholesalers and the increasing presence of major distributors—it soon became apparent that smaller operations would not be sustainable if they continued to prioritize variety in their marketing (Anon. “Distributors Move” 1). To this end, they had to find a means of making themselves appear noteworthy in a scrum of rivals. As I have explained elsewhere, one solution was to target children specifically on the grounds that, as the school holidays were imminent, cartoons and family films were anticipated to encourage repeat viewings. Unlike feature films, which, it was believed, were typically watched once, children’s videos “were expected to have the commercial endurance required to help companies survive rationalization” (Walker “Video Nicies”). Another tactic was for the independents to mimic the ways that major companies—which now had a stronghold on the video market—presented themselves in their advertising campaigns. It was hoped that by doing so the independents would be able to achieve comparable levels of success.

“RENOWNED IN THE FILM INDUSTRY”: COMPANY HISTORIES AND INDUSTRY PEDIGREE

Because many of the bigger North American firms such as Twentieth Century Fox – which traded as “Magnetic Video” until 1982 – and Warner Bros. had long-standing reputations in the film and television industries, they would often, in bids to invoke an air of quality and prestige around their video products, draw on their distinguished histories in print advertising and trade interviews. For instance, upon starting operations on the UK market in November 1980, the first print advert for the Warner Bros. label WCI Home Video promised to bestow the grandeur of the Hollywood blockbuster upon Britons’ living rooms by “giv[ing] the small screen the big treatment” with box office hits such as *Dirty Harry* (Siegel 1971), *Deliverance* (Boorman 1972), *Enter the Dragon* (Clouse 1973), *Blazing Saddles* (Brooks 1974), and *The Exorcist* (Friedkin 1974) (see WCI Video; see also fig. 3).[[8]](#endnote-8) Similarly, a leaflet published by Fox in 1982 encouraged video dealers to “start building up the bankables” by “link[ing] up with a legend” (Twentieth Century Fox Video [UK]).

**[Insert Figure 3 here]**

Most independents could not make claims of this magnitude. The majority were either too new and thus had no “history” to boast of or in some cases had names “synonymous” with industries that lacked the allure of their major competitors. Cases in point are Intervision and VCL, which were originally set up to supply video projection facilities to nightclubs in the south of England (see Upton). However, a couple of independent operations did have histories worth exploiting.

Derann and Walton Video had several decades’ experience between them, both having distributed feature films on Super-8 and 16mm since the 1960s.[[9]](#endnote-9) Both had relationships with major industry players including several Hollywood Studios, as well as pre-established distribution arrangements with leading high street retailers. Derann was certainly keen to boast of its company history on its move into video in 1980. Its first consumer advert, published in the consumer magazine *Video World*, proclaimed the company’s move into video was “natural” on account of the fact that it had been “leaders in Super-8 home movie distribution for many years” (Derann Audio Visual, Untitled Trade Advertisement 7). Its first video catalogue, published in 1981, also drew on its legacy, proudly announcing “Derann now [brings] to your television screen that same reliability, quality and reputation for great entertainment value that they have been bringing to your home movie screen for 18 years” (Derann Audio Visual Catalogue 1st edition). Such claims were not unfounded. As Derek Simmonds, the company’s managing director, later explained to the trade paper *Television and Video Retailer*, his company remained the exclusive UK agents of Universal, Paramount, and United Artists for Super-8 releases (Derann Audio Visual “Derann Backs Dealers” 3), having handled highly profitable titles such as *Star Wars* (Lucas 1977) (Dean “Derann, Derann” 25). Being “renowned in the film industry” prior to the video boom arguably gave Derann extra visibility compared to its newer competitors as well as an impression of gravitas at a time when many other independents were still trying to find their voices (Ibid. 24).

Originally established in the 1950s to trade in photographic slides, Walton Video had been in the home entertainment business even longer than Derann (Walton Video “Aiming” 3). This factor, coupled with its move into Super-8 film distribution in the 1960s, made a standout operation at the dawn of the video boom. A supplemental booklet issued with the trade paper *Video Business* in June 1982 boasted of how, not dissimilar to Derann, Walton’s industry experience set it apart from the “many companies that have simply jumped on the accelerating video bandwagon” (Ibid.): companies which, according to the booklet, “spring up overnight only to disappear just as quickly” (Anon. “Movie Pacts” 1). Here, as with Derann, Walton’s historical success and proven passion for home entertainment is used as a legitimizing factor in its foreseen longevity, while its smaller competitors are discounted on account of their opportunism and inevitable transience; they are not likely to survive, the booklet suggests, because they lack Walton’s defining qualities, the most important of which are its history and longstanding industry pedigree. “When the video industry started”, the company’s managing director (and former film producer and director) Hamish Gibson claimed “[Walton] were [sic] already well established in the home movie business” (Walton Video “Aiming” 3; on Gibson’s career in movies see Walton Video “An” 6). The company’s existing business relationships with high street retailers such as the electronics giant Dixons—which stocked its 8mm reels—is said to have contributed heavily to the company’s situating itself as a “major” force in home video, because, according to Gibson, such marriages “gave [Walton] instant credibility” in the new video market (Ibid.). Walton’s history as a “leading” market player is also used to validate further claims that the firm is reliable and that it is dealing in quality material. As with Derann and, by extension, Fox and Warner Bros., Walton’s legacy is capitalized on to distinguish it from the many other newer and less-experienced independent competitors; companies that Walton characterizes as merely entering the business “for a quick and easy buck” (Walton Video “Aiming” 3).

“BIG SCREEN RELEASES”: PRESTIGE ADVERTIZING

The legacies and historic business agreements of companies such as Derann and Walton did not protect them from what was perhaps the foremost disadvantage faced by the majority of independent distributors: namely an inability to obtain the video rights to the most desirable movies. While, as noted above, Derann owned the rights to some popular titles from major companies on Super-8, these rights rarely extended to video. Therefore, as Derann continued to trade in the Super-8 version of *Star Wars* in the early 1980s (which, as was often the case with such releases, constituted 18 minutes of “highlights” from the film), Fox released it onto video in 1982, to far greater success. Moreover, because most major companies had been skeptical of video since the launch of Betamax in the US in 1976—due, primarily, to concerns over piracy (Wasser 82-91)—most were reluctant to license any of their films to independent video distributors as a result.[[10]](#endnote-10) To this end, most independents including Derann and Walton would populate their catalogues with films licensed from independent theatrical distributors in the UK and abroad (Walker “Rewind, Playback”). The majors, when they eventually entered the UK market, were therefore in a position to fully utilize their expansive back catalogues and release many films onto video that had proven popular with cinemagoers all over the world. Fox/Magnetic, for instance, handled Oscar-winners such as *The Sound of Music* (Wise 1965) and *The French Connection* (Friedkin 1971), while Warner Bros., as indicated above, released some its most popular box office hits of the 1960s and 1970s along with what is perhaps the most famous of all classical Hollywood Westerns, *The Searchers* (Ford 1956) (Macpherson 13; WCI Video).

Having a pool of such well-known “quality” material from which to draw posed an instant challenge for smaller companies, whose releases, while often popular in their own right,[[11]](#endnote-11) were rarely able to amass the same levels of popularity as those released by the majors. This was a state of affairs reflected in the first annual video rental and sales charts published in *Video Business* at the beginning of 1982 (Lazell 6), which saw the major companies (CIC, Warner, Thorn EMI, and Fox/Magnetic) and major films (e.g. CIC’s *Jaws* [Spielberg 1975] and *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* [Wise 1979]; Warner’s *Enter the Dragon* and *The Exorcist*; Thorn EMI’s *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest* [Forman 1975], and *The Deer Hunter* [Cimino 1978]; and Fox/Magnetic’s *Alien* [Scott 1979] and *Damian: Omen II* [Taylor 1978]) dominate. Smaller firms, outside of Intervision (which for a time enjoyed success commensurable to the majors due to its deal with United Artists and a subsequent deal with Alpha Films in Britain),[[12]](#endnote-12) had to find other means imbuing their videos with an analogous sense of iconicity and prestige.

One strategy saw the independents adopt rhetoric in promotional copy akin to that used by majors when advertising their big films. It was therefore typical for smaller operations to repackage older films as “star vehicles” if they happened to feature early/later-career performances by known actors, or to market lesser-known films of varying ages and budgets as “blockbusters” or “major” films. Mountain, thus, promised to “bring the stars into your home” when promoting among other titles “The Jack Nicholson classic” *The Rebel Rousers* (Cohen 1970) in 1981 (Mountain Video Untitled Trade Advertisement A), while, in early 1982, Hokushin encouraged its customers to rent, among its other videos, *No Place to Hide* (Schnitzer 1970) starring “Sylvester ‘ROCKY’ Stallone” to ensure that “the dark evenings” of the British winter “have stars” (Hokushin Untitled Trade Advertisement C). Similarly, in March 1982 PMA Video announced the release of four “BIG SCREEN RELEASES!”, of which only one, *Knut Hamsun’s Mysteries* (de Lussanet 1978), had been exhibited theatrically, while the other three – *Dracula* (Curtis 1973), *When Every Day was the Fourth of July* (Dan Curtis, 1978), and *The Long Days of Summer* (Curtis 1980) – were TV movies (see PMA Video [emphasis in original]). Likewise, in April Go would claim that the low-budget Italian thriller *Bandits!* (Corbucci 1982) was yet “another great ‘Blockbuster’ From Go Video Ltd” (Go Video Ltd. Untitled Trade Advertisement), while around the same time Starcurve launched an entire range of so-called “Video Blockbusters” comprising twenty obscure films in a host of popular genres including action-adventure titles such as *Mutiny in the Southseas* (Becker 1965), *White Cargo from Hong Kong* (Stegani/Ashley 1964), and *The Pirates of the Mississippi* (Roland 1963) (see Starcurve).

Through capitalizing on the presence of “stars” and promoting independent movies as “major” releases, the smaller distributors could mobilize a sense of currency and value at a time when more recent and better-known films—on occasion featuring the same actors—were getting wide exposure from the majors. Indeed, as the industry paper *Video Retailer* reported, due to the “pulling power of a leading actor/actress in the marketing of a title” videos could sell “merely by [the actor/actress’s] presence” (Dean “Sons of Conan” 23). It is therefore of some significance that the aforementioned release of the *Rebel Rousers* was promoted around the same time as Thorn EMI’s release of the much more recent Jack Nicholson film *One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, and that *No Place to Hide* was released following Intervision/United Artists’ releases of *Rocky* and *Rocky II* (Stallone 1979). These approaches bestowed grandeur upon older and lesser-known films, and helped contribute to the construction of many independents’ desired business images as worthy competitors to the majors, ones trading in films of comparable quality.

Another strategy adopted by the independents to rival their major counterparts was to distribute “exploitation versions” of popular Hollywood films. These kinds of film, and the marketing campaigns that accompanied them, would function the same in the video market as they had done in their original theatrical context, by “aping, more or less faithfully, the most exploitable elements of a specific high profile movie” to “piggy-back on the hype” (Hunter 9). Thus, when Warner Bros., Fox, and CIC released onto video major theatrical hits from the mid-to-late 1970s including *Superman: The Movie* (Donner 1979 [Warner Bros.]), *Star Wars* (Fox) and *Apocalypse Now* (Coppola 1979 [CIC]), Inter-Ocean, VIPCO, and Go released the low-budget alternatives *Supersonic Man* (Simon 1979 [Inter-Ocean]), *Starcrash* (Cozzi 1978 [VIPCO]), and *Apocalypse - The Untold Story* (McLeod 1981 [Go]). This tactic, while indicative of decades-old exploitation marketing methods, was regarded in the video trade as a savvy way legitimately to battle the major’s steady monopolization, especially since such releases were often supported by attractive and often very expensive marketing campaigns.

Go Video is a particularly notable company in this regard. Mostly remembered for having prompted several complaints to the Advertising Standards Authority due to the promotional poster it used to advertise the soon-to-be video nasty *SS Experiment Camp* (Petley *Film and Video* 24), Go contemporaneously drew some positive attention from the trade press for its approach to marketing. Indeed, having reportedly spent £60,000 on promoting *Apocalypse – The Untold Story* (along with seven other movies) in September 1982 (Anon. “It’s All Go” 16), *Video Retailer* would commend Go’s managing director Des Dolan for “recognizing that the majors hold many trump cards with their relationships with the big film studios” and that by “cleverly exploiting” markets that had oftentimes been established by the majors themselves, Dolan’s smaller firm presented an admirable challenge to them (Anon. “Going …” 37). For instance, in 1982, when Thorn EMI released *Conan the Barbarian* (Milieus 1982) onto video to lucrative returns (Dean “Sons of Conan” 23), Go repackaged a much older film, *Arminius the Terrible* (Bald 1967), using the most “dispersible” elements of *Conan*’s high concept poster—the titular warrior brandishing an axe, standing tall above a scantily-clad, sword-wielding woman—to promote it (Austin qtd in Nowell 48; see Figure 4). Riding the coat tails of a major release in this way proved rewarding. Reportedly on account of its “straight-forward marketing philosophy”, the company’s turnovers had increased by 200% since it started operating in 1981 (Anon. “Going …” 37). The revelation of these figures attested to the fact that, while Go was not a “major” distributor in the strictest sense of the term, it was able, by emulating the strategies and film releases of its corporate counterparts, to mobilize recognition from the industry as a “major independent” nonetheless and outwardly to project an image of a company enjoying success at a time when the majors statistically had much wider appeal (Ibid.).

**[Insert Figure 4 here]**

Go’s marketing style would encourage other independents to employ similar methods. Indeed, around about the same time as *Arminius* was being promoted, Replay Video advertised another “mythological thriller” (Dean “Sons of Conan” 23), *The Barbarian* (Maté 1960), and, within a couple of months, Medusa Video issued *The Iron Master* (Lenzi 1982). The promotional materials for both, as per *Conan* and *Arminius*, depicted a hulking warrior brandishing an ancient weapon accompanied by a slender and semi-/nude woman. Yet, while such an approach proved profitable for many companies (Dean “The Cover-up” 26), there were others who sought to distance themselves from what, according to John Parry, the managing director of the independent distributor Iver Film Services (IFS), was “generally ‘very tacky’” point-of-sale material (Wade “Banking on Blockbusters” 56). It was the strategy of IFS in particular to emulate more generally the *branding* strategies of the majors. That is to say, whereas companies such as Go and Replay would regard the *individual* box art of a specific title as “*the* most important marketing strategy” (Dean “The Cover-up” 26 [emphasis in original]), IFS prioritized catalogue-wide uniformity in its packaging, as per Warner Bros., Fox, and the other major players. IFS’s branding thus not only *looked* similar to the majors, but was also designed to evoke a comparable sense of history, professionalism, and market positioning to those companies with a more distinguished heritage.

The artworks of IFS’s 1981 releases, for instance, all shared the same basic design: a film still housed in a black/white “frame,” plus the film’s title, along with company information, its slogan— “The Professionals at Pinewood”—and its logo: an illustration of an Academy Award (see Iver Film Services). The design, slogan, and logo were equally paramount to IFS’s company image and directly echoed the major companies, specifically, Warner Bros., from which IFS appeared to lift the basic color scheme and layout. By echoing the Warner Bros. style, IFS could convey a comparable sense of consistency across its entire range; that of a brand which, due to the uniformity of its packaging, would hopefully be recognizable among consumers, just as it was becoming a talking point in the trade press (Moore 62). Moreover, the company slogan and logo suggested, as per IFS’s major rivals, that it was a firm invested in quality, award-winning films. Yet, while Parry had a background in film production and IFS’s offices were based at Pinewood Studios, no film in the company’s 1981 range was shot at Pinewood, nor had any won an Academy Award.[[13]](#endnote-13) Rather, its catalogue consisted of the kinds of independently-produced film similar to those handled by the likes of Go, Replay, and Hokushin, such as the horror film *Knife for the Ladies* (Spangler 1972), the action film *Honey Baby* (Schultz 1974), the family film *Elmer* (Cain 1976), and the sexploitation film *Love Camp* (Franco 1977). Nevertheless, by directly invoking historic institutions of popular cinema in its branding, IFS projected a major image onto not-so-major productions, adding a superficial veneer of gloss to films which had not been shown in UK cinemas. Indeed, projecting an easily recognizable brand that spoke of quality and history was yet another strategy employed to help an independent company stand out in an increasingly crowded marketplace, and to appear as worthy of consumers’ money as those with greater resources and reputations.

In spite of the best efforts of the independents, many would be bankrupt by the end of 1983. This was partly due to the video nasties panic which had been gaining momentum since 1982, and which, as Kate Egan has argued, created a “commercial stigma” which some independents failed to overcome (70-2). For most, however, it was market rationalization and the increasing stronghold of the majors that signaled their downfall. In early 1983, major companies accounted for around 70% of the video rental market, while one-time market leaders, Intervision, accounted for a mere 2%, and smaller independents such as Replay, Hokushin, Videospace, and Astra were among the “others” that made up 3-5% (Anon. “First Quarter” 8; Anon. “Second Quarter” 5).[[14]](#endnote-14) Independents suffered further when majors, led by the newly-merged CBS/Fox Video, began offering “discounts” to dealers “in a bid to build up their rosters” (Anon. “More Majors” 4), while it became increasingly common for smaller companies to strike deals with the majors so that they could continue to operate. This was the case with IFS, which came to a sales and distribution agreement with CBS/Fox. As Parry commented to *Video Business*: “the logical way to succeed in the ever-changing video industry was to use the professional services of a major company” (Anon. “Iver to” 4; see also Anon. “Movie Pacts” 4). Thus, while the independents had striven—in some cases since the late 1970s—to echo the professionalism and reputation of corporate giants by employing a variety of marketing strategies, the smaller firms could ultimately not match the appeal or corporate muscle of their major rivals.

## CONCLUSION

Julian Petley has argued that the “lurid video covers and advertisements” used by independent distributors to promote films that would eventually be banned as nasties “simply spawned their mirror images in the censorious press” (Petley “Review” 328). The same could be argued of the distributors themselves, and how their centrality to the video nasty press campaign has, over the years, helped cultivate their reputation as “outlaw” dealers in popular culture more broadly (Egan). However, this article has shown how such companies—from the pioneering Intervision to others such as Derann, Walton, Go, and IFS—endeavored to target a broad range of audiences by trading in eclectic catalogues and presenting themselves as credible rivals to majors such as Fox and Warner.

Historically, it has been all too common for “independent entrepreneurs” of the video revolution to succumb to the pressures of Hollywood subsidiaries (McDonald 141). Yet, as the examples discussed in this article show, for a short while in Britain, smaller operations played bigger companies at their own game with varying degrees of success. Although video nasty discourse continues to frame independent British distributors as brash and outrageous, this article has revealed—to quote a self-aware advert for Hokushin from 1981—independent companies were “not all nasty” (Hokushin Untitled Trade Advertisement A). Rather, they endeavored to attract the entire spectrum of VCR owners. Having examined the breadth and ordinariness of said companies, it is hoped that a clearer understanding of British video history has emerged from this article, and that future scholars will continue to pose challenges to the cultural (and cult) aura of the video nasties, which has tended to cloud discussion.

Further research will determine to what extent comparable practices to those outlined in this article were evident in other national contexts. Such studies promise to reveal whether the British situation examined in these pages is unique, or whether or not it is emblematic of historic trends worldwide. One might anticipate, in light of the fact that Hollywood very swiftly dominated most global video markets—and that, where it did not, the most widely-seen films were often indebted to genres popularized by Western film industries—that the latter will be true (McDonald 141-2; Labato 56-9; Smith).

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1. NOTES

   *Shock! Horror!* is written by moderators of the online forum http://pre-cert.co.uk, which, as Mark McKenna explains, “has become an important hub for collectors” of early videos and related ephemera (McKenna 123 n.8). *Art of the Nasty* is a joint effort between one of the aforementioned forum moderators, Marc Morris, and video distributor, Nigel Wingrove: the latter of whom was responsible for re-issuing some video nasties under his Redemption Films label in the 1990s (where Morris also worked). *Video Nasties* and *Video Nasties 2* are penned by Allan Bryce, the editor of Britain’s leading horror film magazine, *The Dark Side*, and also feature the involvement of Morris. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The documentaries, *Ban the Sadist Videos: Part 1* and *2* (Gregory 2005), *Video Nasties: Moral Panic, Censorship and Videotape* (West 2010) and *Video Nasties: Draconian Days* (West 2014), as well as “Under Pressure”, an episode of the recent BBC series *The 80s with Dominic Sandbrook* (2016), also contribute to this discourse. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. There were of course a number of companies that did have specific demographics in sight, such as Scripglow and Michael Barratt Ltd, which distributed softcore pornography and DIY instructional videos respectively, but these were in the minority (on Scripglow, see Lockey; on Barratt see Wade “Michael Barratt”). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Intervision features in all of the aforementioned coffee-table books. Tellingly, a US-based cult DVD label, Severin Films, acquired the company name in 2012, and went on to relaunch Intervision as the distributor of a number of micro-budget shot-on-video (SOV) European horror films such as *The Burning Moon* (Ittenbach 1992) and *Island of the Living Dead* (Mattei 2008), as well as promote several limited edition facsimile VHS re-releases of video nasty titles including *Expose* and *The Gestapo’s Last Orgy* (Canevari 1977). This was a business move done under the pretense that, according to Severin’s press release, Intervision had “been dedicated to everything fascinating and extraordinary about obscure genre works” since “the days of plastic clamshell VHS” (Anon. “Severin”). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. In 1974, the trade paper *CinemaTV Today*, published the first ever directory of audio visual companies, in which Intervision appears (Barton 1974; on the pre-Betamax history of VCRs, see MacDonald 28-32). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Other companies included VCL, BBC Enterprises Film Sales, Audio and Visual Ltd., Istead Audio Visual, and the video arm of the International Publishing Corporation (IPC). All dealt in pre-recorded videos, but their catalogues were largely made up of non-fiction material such as previously-televised music programs, documentaries, sports titles, or, in the specific case of Instead, films from the NASA archives (Sanders 53). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Examples include Hello, Fletcher, Go, Replay, 21st Century, Precision, Cinehollywood, Guild, Video Tape Centre, Iver Film Services, Walton and Kingston. This list is indicative. In the middle of 1982, there were over 80 companies in operation (Walker “Video Nicies”). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. The moniker “WCI Home Video” did not actually make it onto the packaging of Warner Bros. releases; by the time the videocassettes made it onto the market, its video division had been renamed “Warner Home Video”. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Several other independent companies had similar backgrounds in the audio-visual sector, including Mountain, Hokushin, and Iver Film Services. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. The notable exception here is Fox, which licensed a number of it older films to the US-based independent Magnetic Video before buying the company out completely in 1979 (Greenberg 52-6). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Independent video companies did on occasion license independently produced films that had proven popular on their cinema run. This was true, for instance, of Intervision and the chart-topping exploitation film *The Exterminator* (Glickenhaus 1980) (Walker, “Rewind, Playback”). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. In 1981, Intervision and Alpha struck a deal whereby the former would distribute onto video the latter’s most popular theatrical releases (Walker “Rewind, Playback”). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. It should be noted that the image of the “Oscar” has been modified slightly, presumably to avoid legal action. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. A couple of majors, MGM/UA and Walt Disney, also repeatedly fell into the “others” category. But, in spite of these anomalies, the market was unquestionably in favor of the bigger companies.

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