

**‘The Film that’s Banned in Harrogate’: *Monty Python’s Life of Brian*, Local
Censorship, Comedy and Local Resistance**

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the banning of *Monty Python’s Life of Brian* by thirty-nine local councils in the UK in late 1979 and early 1980. Focusing on three of these local areas – Harrogate, Dudley and Swansea – it draws on discursive analysis of local newspaper debate generated by both editors and readers, and the various arguments and strategies they employed to question the right of the local council to remove *Life of Brian* from their communities, including arguments relating to consumer choice and freedom and local trade and cultural reputation. Through doing this, the article foregrounds an approach that has yet to be explored extensively within the emergent body of work on local film censorship in the UK, advocating for the fruitfulness of a community-based historical analysis of resistance to local film regulation as well as the more commonly employed council-based analysis of local government files and archives. The article also considers the *Life of Brian* case study as an example of local film controversy where the themes and features of the film itself were drawn on by local resisters of the ban in a range of creative and productive ways.

KEYWORDS: local film censorship; local newspapers; Monty Python; comedy and censorship

In August 1979, the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC) granted *Monty Python's Life of Brian* (Terry Jones, 1979) an 'AA' certificate (suitable for age fourteen and over) without cuts, a decision that was made after the BBFC had obtained legal advice on whether the film might be blasphemous. This issue was of particular concern after the British publication *Gay News* was prosecuted for blasphemous libel in 1976, but the BBFC had received reassurance that *Life of Brian* was not legally blasphemous. However – according to documents in the BBFC archives – by mid-1980, eleven councils had banned *Life of Brian* from their constituencies, twenty-eight councils had altered the film's certificate from an 'AA' to an 'X' (ultimately leading it to be banned, as the film's distributor, CIC, refused to allow it to be screened in localities where a change to the original BBFC certificate was requested), and sixty-two had screened the film to councillors but eventually decided to uphold the BBFC's 'AA' certificate (see fig. 1).

In 2019, as *Life of Brian* was re-released in the UK to mark its fortieth anniversary, those attending screenings were gifted with an 'exclusive 40th anniversary commemorative pack'.¹ Amongst the pack's posters, stickers, fake beards, and song lyrics, was a reprint of a 2018 article from the *Daily Telegraph* by British comedian Sanjeev Bhaskar which reflected on the film's history and impact, and referred to these local council bans and the consequent coach party trips organised by residents 'in places such as Cornwall (where it was banned) to cinemas in Exeter (where it wasn't)'.² At the same time, the *Harrogate Advertiser* heralded a visit by Michael Palin to Harrogate (to promote his book, *Erebus The Story of a Ship*) by noting that he had appeared 'to have forgiven the town' after it banned the film in late 1979. Meanwhile *Wales Online* marked the film's re-release with a piece recounting 'the hilarious story of how Monty Python's comedy classic *Life of Brian* was banned in Swansea'.³

As this illustrates, these local censorship activities have become part of *Life of Brian*'s cultural history in the UK, as well as noteworthy facts about the towns and cities that banned the film. However, back in July 1980, the furore around the film in local areas throughout the UK led the BBFC secretary, James Ferman to write to local councils expressing concerns about what the *Life of Brian* controversy had revealed about the local censorship system in the UK – in light of the controversy's status as 'a useful test of the local option in practice, having been seen by more local authorities than any other film during the past decade', and in light of the 1977 Williams Committee report on Obscenity and Film Censorship, which had proposed the scrapping of local authority censorship powers in the UK.⁴

As a growing number of film scholars have argued, the film censorship powers of local authorities – their status as 'the sole holders of statutory authority to impose cuts or bans' on films exhibited publicly in the UK – has been under-researched in comparison to the extensive academic study of the activities of the BBFC.⁵ These local authority powers originate in the 1909 Cinematograph Act, which, while primarily put into place so that local councils could grant or withhold licences to cinemas within their jurisdiction based on fire hazard and safety requirements, was interpreted as enabling councils to deny or award licences to cinemas based on the kind and content of films they exhibited. Consequently, as Sian Barber has noted, 'by refusing an exhibition license for the exhibition of a particular film or making their displeasure known to local cinemas who exhibit controversial material and who depend on the local council for the renewal of their exhibition license, local committees wield a significant amount of power'.⁶

Both Barber and Julian Petley have considered how local authority decisions on controversial films released in the first half of the 1970s were informed by the tactics of the Christian

organisation the Nationwide Festival of Light, which, as Barber notes, was ‘able to exert significant pressure’ on local councils through its highly organised approach of encouraging regional members to write to councils or organise petitions to protest against the possible exhibition of a contentious film in their local area.⁷ Barber’s 2016 article, ‘Exploiting Local Controversy’ offers a comparative historical analysis of regional responses to Bernardo Bertolucci’s *Last Tango in Paris* (1972) in three locations, in order to ‘illuminate and explore local difference rather than to argue for a binary of national versus local censorship’.⁸ Drawing on council minutes, policy documents and other council documentation and correspondence, Barber persuasively argues for the crucial importance of such comparative analysis to local film censorship studies in order to consider the particular cultural and social-economic dynamics, preoccupations and networks of power and interaction that inform and shape local film censorship in different regional areas of the UK.

However, there are two of Barber’s findings that this article wishes to unpack and complicate. Firstly, Barber points to the importance of attending to specific forms of local discourse by mapping the ‘uneven reaction’ to the Festival of Light’s tactics and forms of pressure across the local councils in Belfast, Oxford and Newport, with these tactics having a substantial impact on local decision-making in Belfast but with their influence being minimal in Oxford and openly resisted by councillors in Newport.⁹ While acknowledging the value and importance of this approach, the primary aim of this article is to conduct analysis of the local discourse around the *Life of Brian* controversy from another perspective – that of the local community members who worked to resist the decisions to ban the film by their local councils, the key mechanisms which supported and sustained this resistance (particularly through the platforms of debate and discussion offered through the local press), and its outcomes and consequences. Through this, the article highlights an approach that has yet to

be explored as extensively in local film censorship scholarship in the UK – the investigation of key local differences powering local censorship controversies through the foregrounding of those who mounted resistance when their local councils succumbed to pressure and banned a film from being screened in their town, city or county. Consequently, the article aims to explore community-based (rather than council-based) forms of regional response and local discourse in the three selected locations (Harrogate, Dudley and Swansea), informed by Jancovich, Faire and Stubbings’ argument that places and regions ‘are inevitably composed of internal conflicts and contradictions, and hence there are competing meanings and definitions of any place as different social groups struggle over it’.¹⁰ While the BBFC was still stating, in July 1980, the importance of retaining local councils’ ‘right to intervene’ particularly when a ‘film touches on local feelings’, this article considers the struggles of some groups in these communities to re-set the agenda of the debate around *Life of Brian* and censorship in their local areas, and to engage in forms of resistance designed to question the council’s right to speak for the community, its interests, identities and concerns.¹¹

Through doing this, the article will also engage with a second finding from Barber’s article. Barber’s archival research on the *Last Tango in Paris* case study indicated the minimal role played by the film and its features/themes in local debate around its regulation. As she notes, ‘evidence gathered about film censorship in different locations has begun to indicate that often *the film itself* is not the object of contention’ and that ‘very little of the material discovered in local collections and archives actually relates to the textual specificities of the film’.¹² While this is clearly the case for some local censorship controversies, this article will illustrate that what is particularly striking about the nature of protests against *Life of Brian*’s local regulation is the way in which Monty Python, and the kinds of humour they represent, are frequently drawn upon as a resource in order to effectively illustrate the anachronistic,

undemocratic or paternalistic nature of local council decisions and the anomalies and inconsistencies that had occurred as a consequence.

In order to explore these forms of resistance, the article will be mindful of a range of key contextual factors. Firstly, the need to consider these discourses of resistance within the context of the 1970s in the UK, a decade ‘of confusion and change’ characterised by what Sian Barber calls ‘competing discourses’ where ‘conservative attitudes to sex and religion’ collided ‘with the legacy of the more permissive 1960s’, but which also – as illustrated by Andy Beckett’s conception of the ‘long 1970s’ – ‘culminated with the election victory of Margaret Thatcher in 1979’.¹³ Secondly, the need to consider the distinctive case of *Life of Brian* within the context of the decade’s ‘censorship crisis’, with, as James C. Robertson, Stevie Simkin, Petley, Barber and others have illustrated, the first half of the decade, in particular, being characterised by a marked rise in local councils intervening and in some cases overturning the classification decisions of the BBFC, with examples including *The Devils* (Ken Russell, 1971), *A Clockwork Orange* (Stanley Kubrick, 1971), *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973) and *Last Tango in Paris*.¹⁴ The appointment of James Ferman as BBFC secretary in 1975 had led to a much greater level of communication between local authorities and the BBFC, particularly through Ferman’s introduction of monthly bulletins which were circulated to all local councils in order to outline the reasoning behind particular classification decisions by the BBFC and which led many local councils to, in Ferman’s words, acquire a ‘a fuller understanding of both the work of the Board and the purpose of film censorship in Britain’.¹⁵ However, while this led to an increase in councils adhering to BBFC decisions and classifications by the end of the 1970s, this is clearly at odds with the scale of the *Life of Brian* local bans in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Ferman, in his July

1980 letter to local authorities, acknowledged and attempted to account for the unusual nature of the *Life of Brian* case by noting that:

It is unusual for a film with an ‘AA’ certificate to be tested so extensively, and it was probably only the allegations of blasphemy provoked by the film’s Biblical theme that induced so many councils to exercise their discretionary powers in this case... An examination of local decisions on the Monty Python film shows that almost none of the councils with regular experience of viewing films found it necessary to alter the Board’s ‘AA’ certificate. This suggests that councillors familiar with current standards have least wish to question the Board’s judgment. Furthermore, most of the committees who altered the certificate to ‘X’ or banned the film completely had not seen any other film during the past two years.¹⁶

Looking at the list of local authorities who banned *Life of Brian*, and those which banned *The Devils*, *A Clockwork Orange* and *Last Tango in Paris* earlier in the decade, is instructive in this regard. There is only a minimal degree of overlap between these lists, and the article will focus on three locations which had not been involved in these censorship activities earlier in the decade but whose local authorities were three of the first to ban or change the certificate of *Life of Brian*. These locations are:

- Harrogate, the spa town in North Yorkshire, England, whose District Council’s Film Selection Sub-Committee was the first to ban the film – initially unseen but, subsequently, after viewing it – on 16th November 1979 and 19th February 1980 respectively.

- Dudley, the market town in the West Midlands, England, whose Borough Council's Environmental Health Committee watched and then upgraded the film from an 'AA' to an 'X' certificate on 12th February 1980.
- Swansea, the coastal city in South Wales, whose City Council banned the film, after a viewing by its Public Protection Sub-Committee, on 18th February 1980.

In order to analyse the discourses that underpinned local resistance to these bans, the article will map the development of these forms of resistance across news reports, editorials and readers' letters from key local newspapers in each of these chosen locations – namely, the *Harrogate Advertiser*, the *Dudley Herald* and the *South Wales Evening Post*. Through doing this, the article aims to illustrate one of the key roles local newspapers can play as a rich resource for the study of local censorship history in the UK. Not just as a documenter of local debate but, particularly through its editorials and letters pages, as a gatekeeper of alternative forms of local discourse, playing – at this time when local newspaper sales in the UK were still high and yet to reach their peak – ‘an active role in shaping the discussions of local communities’ but also providing a relatively wide-open ‘forum for local debate’, and ‘a stimulus for a healthy local democracy’.¹⁷

RESISTANCE TACTIC 1: QUESTIONING THE REMIT OF THE COUNCIL

On a broad level and on the basis of articles, letters and quotations from councillors included in my case study newspapers, the key discourses employed by those arguing for local bans of *Life of Brian* mirror those identified by scholars analysing other film censorship campaigns large and small.¹⁸ Firstly, a key tactic, drawn on repeatedly by councillors on the sub-committees which had banned the film from their local area, was to foreground their

knowledge and qualifications to determine which films were acceptable for exhibition in their area over the forms of knowledge and judgement that had informed the BBFC's decision to pass *Life of Brian* for exhibition with an 'AA' certificate and without cuts. A key employer of this discourse was the chairman of Harrogate District Council's Film Selection Sub-Committee, Harold Hitchen, the primary spokesman and defender of this council's right to ban films and, in the case of *Life of Brian*, to ban them unseen. At a Council meeting called to discuss the Sub-Committee's decision to ban *Life of Brian* without seeing it (and determine whether this decision should be upheld), Hitchen is quoted by the newspaper as stating to the council 'that the leaders of both the Christian and the Jewish churches have condemned the film as being "blasphemous and objectionable"'. In addition, in a later *Harrogate Advertiser* article focused on whether the council's censorship powers should be scrapped, Hitchen defended its importance by noting that 'it works because it is operated by ordinary people rather than professional film viewers who see so many they become a bit hardened about the contents of some films'.¹⁹ In both these cases, and in many others, enactors of the *Life of Brian* ban and their defenders therefore clearly sought to challenge the primacy of legal definitions of blasphemy by foregrounding definitions put forward by church-leaders, while, in a similar vein, pitting the notion of 'hardened' and desensitised experts and professionals represented by the BBFC against themselves as representatives, and thus defenders of, 'ordinary people'.

Secondly, there is the broad employment by these decision-makers and their defenders, throughout these debates, of broad terms – of morals, of standards – designed to represent what they see themselves as protecting through these acts of censorship, in order to not only shield those in the community who might be offended by *Life of Brian* but also, crucially,

those who they see as lacking or not yet having obtained these morals and standards. As Hitchen is quoted as stating in a *Harrogate Advertiser* article, for instance, his concern:

was with young people between 16 and 23 who were still trying to find out what life was all about, what were the right standards, and what was the place of sex in life. They might be old enough to marry and raise a family but they might not have found out much about life. Many would be vulnerable. I could not possibly claim that we do a great deal of good, but the little we do is worth doing.²⁰

This defence of local censorship, relating to the need to morally protect not only those who were yet to reach adulthood but also young adults between 18 and 23, is, notably, at odds with BBFC policy at the time, in particular, the Board's decision to award *Life of Brian* an 'AA' certificate. Julian Upton, in an article on the history of the BBFC's 'AA' certificate, notes that it was introduced in 1970 by the then secretary of the BBFC, John Trevelyan – alongside the re-labelling of the 'X' certificate to certify films only suitable for those 18 and above – as part of 'a revamp of the classification system amidst increasingly heated arguments around "permissiveness" and the cinema'. The aim of the introduction of the 'AA', in this context, was 'to acknowledge a liberalisation of attitudes in the classification of material for teenage audiences', with the 'AA' therefore symbolising the Board's attempts to offer a 'meaningful response' to the needs, tastes and interests of younger audiences regarding youth-oriented representations of sexuality, adulthood and political critique.²¹ In marked contrast to these aims, Hitchen and his defenders here present a conception of local council film committees as needing to make decisions on films on behalf of not only teenagers but also young adults who would, in the BBFC's terms, be permitted to see both 'AA'- and 'X'-certified films but who are conceived, in Hitchen's terms, as 'vulnerable' and

unable to make judgements on what films they should see as a result of their undeveloped sense of what 'life' – in these councillor's homogenous terms – 'was all about'.

In response to the consistent employment of these discourses, readers' letters from members of the public across all three local newspapers brand the decisions of their council committees as 'selfish', 'irresponsible', 'narrow-minded' and 'undemocratic'.²² These members of the public, as well as local councillors who voted against or who were unhappy with the decisions of the relevant sub-committees, employ four key discourses to challenge the authority of those who had made these decisions and promulgated the previously identified arguments. Firstly, these resisters of the ban consistently question the right and supposed remit of the council to make decisions based on the morals of the community, and work to reclaim their right (the right of the community and not the council) to determine and define conceptions of morality within their own lives. In a *Harrogate Advertiser* article on the ban, for instance, a resisting council member, Councillor Philip Broadbank, is noted as stating that 'it seemed morally wrong to him that people of ages over 40 should decide what films could and could not be seen. Councillors were not elected to be moral guardians but to supply and maintain satisfactory local government services', while a letter-writer in the *South Wales Evening Post* notes that the council should 'give people the chance to exercise their own moral standards' by passing *Life of Brian* for local consumption.²³

Secondly, in comments and letters from ban-resisters, emphasis is placed on local people's rights as ratepayers and the ways in which such rights were being violated through the council's decisions on the film, particularly through the time and money that had been wasted when their council had opted to request a copy of the film and then organise council screenings and follow-up meetings in order to make a decision on the film and its regulation.

As one Harrogate letter-writer notes, ‘I am sure that the ratepayers of Harrogate are perfectly capable of deciding for themselves which films they and their offspring should or should not see, without having to pay for the arrogant intervention of bureaucrats. One might also ask, are we getting value for our money?’²⁴ Meanwhile, for others, the denial of freedom of choice represented by the council committees’ decisions was a serious encroachment on their civil liberties. As a *South Wales Evening Post* editorial notes, for instance, ‘freedom of choice for the individual is a vital part of our democracy. In this case in particular, and in other similar incidents in general, the individual should be permitted to retain the ultimate weapon of censorship – the right to see the film or to stay at home’.²⁵ And, for a letter-writer in Harrogate (who illustrates their clear understanding of the network of powers informing the local *Life of Brian* bans), ‘The road that Lord Longford, Mary Whitehouse, the Festival of Light, Harold Hitchen and his committee would take us down is one that leads to repression, persecution, fear and a loss of personal freedom. All who value their present diminishing freedoms must stand up and be counted’.²⁶

Thirdly, and crucially, the representativeness of the relevant council sub-committees is consistently challenged by resisters of the ban. This repeated discourse across local newspaper coverage illustrates, in particular, the ways in which protests against the councils’ decisions frequently crossed political lines and crystallised around the issue of ‘people of ages over 40’ making decisions about which films can be screened in local areas when, as noted by James Ferman in his July 1980 letter to local authorities, 77% of the cinema audience in the UK at that time was under 35.²⁷ This disparity is consistently raised by letter-writers and other resisters in all three local areas, with the decision to ban *Life of Brian* being seen to clearly illustrate the ‘outdated’, ‘archaic’ values of the ‘predominantly veteran’ council members who had the power to make such judgements on public morals, values and

taste in relation to the cinema.²⁸ For a letter-writer in Dudley, the council had shown, through its decision, that it was ‘out of touch with the needs of teenagers’ and therefore didn’t ‘deserve to have the power of censorship’, while the local ban on the film had aroused resentment, as a local teacher in Harrogate reported, among ‘quite serious and intellectual sixth formers in Harrogate’ as well as the starting of petitions against the council decision amongst schoolchildren in the area.²⁹ As a consequence, these forms of resistance worked to construct a strong counter-case based on the committees’ lack of qualifications to ‘dictate what is fit for “local” consumption’ because they had shown themselves, through their acts and decisions, to, in the words of a Swansea letter-writer, ‘be totally out of touch with public opinion in the city’ and, in particular, the opinion of the rate-payers and cinemagoers who were sending letters ‘by the score’ to their local newspapers in order to register their views.³⁰

What is also worth noting, with regards to this issue of representativeness, is the strong influence of the Methodist church/chapel on the make-up of these council committees, with two of these committees, Harrogate’s Film Selection Sub-Committee and Swansea’s Public Protection Sub-Committee, being chaired by Methodist Lay Preachers (Harold Hitchen and Ken Hawkins respectively) and with the *Life of Brian* issue having been brought to the attention of Dudley’s Environmental Health Committee through a petition signed by 588 members of the nine churches in the ‘Dudley Methodist circuit’.³¹ This correlates with Julian Petley’s argument that:

the councillors who may be called upon to sit in judgement on controversial films will most certainly not have been elected because of their abilities as film censors, are not a representative cross-section of the public...and may well include among their ranks those who joined the relevant committee purely because they strongly

support strict censorship or, at any rate, stricter censorship than that practised by the BBFC.³²

This also helps to explain the evidence, across all the case study local newspapers, of the fractures between those who supported and those who resisted the decisions of these committees within each local council, with, for instance, a *South Wales Evening Post* article noting that ‘the controlling Labour group’ on Swansea City Council were ‘obviously embarrassed in its role’ as local film censor.³³ While, during this time period, two of the case study councils (Harrogate and Dudley) had a Conservative majority and the third (Swansea) was Labour-controlled, all three case study councils shared the strong influence of the Methodist church/chapel within the make-up of the committees responsible for local film censorship, suggesting, in line with Petley’s argument, that this is where those council members strongly committed to moral regulation were congregating within these councils at the time. Indeed, this sense that the unrepresentativeness of these committees related not only to age but also religion and church- or chapel-going is evident in a number of letters in these local newspapers. In a letter in the *Swansea Evening Post*, for instance, one letter-writer notes that ‘only about 12 per cent of our people are regular church-goers’, and ‘the other 88 per cent of Britishers in our secular society want maximum freedom to see TV and films and read all books, satire included’.³⁴ In the same newspaper, a sixteen year old letter-writer astutely references a key theme of *Life of Brian* itself – epitomised in Brian’s ‘you’re all individuals’ speech – when noting that:

by condemning the film, the church-people, and Councillor Hawkins are condemning the fact that 14 year olds might actually think for themselves about religion, and how it affects them. If all these church people have nothing to fear or

hide, then they would not condemn the film so readily! Why can't we think for ourselves? Possibly by working out religion for oneself, our 'worried' church people might witness a greater attendance in Church.³⁵

This argument, that these committee members were representing a minority of older churchgoers in these communities rather than the majority of younger cinemagoers, is thus starkly represented here by the idea of empty pews in local churches and chapels. Indeed, the fact that these discourses were particularly frequent in Swansea's local newspaper coverage of the *Life of Brian* controversy connects with Colin Rosser and Christopher Harris's argument that, even back in the early 1960s, the previously marked high level of religious activity and church and chapel-going in Swansea had dipped. Indeed, their findings showed 'a much greater incidence of active religious performance among the older age groups as compared with the younger', with, for them, this pointing to 'something of the decline in church- and chapel-going which has occurred over the past two generations or so'.³⁶

Meanwhile, adopting the same discursive position of presenting the council committee's decision as representing a minority local view, a letter from the Dudley West Young Conservatives in the *Dudley Herald* notes, in response to the newspaper reporting the submission to the council of a petition signed by 588 members of the Dudley Methodist church, that 'the whole debate has so far been articulated by unrepresentative groups of religious protagonists'. Furthermore, and in order to foreground the notion that the petition represented a minority view and perspective, they note in their letter that the numbers who had signed this petition could 'be doubled by ourselves quite effortlessly'.³⁷ Through these tactics, then, the presumed authority of these council committees and their decisions is resisted and challenged. This is also supported by a fourth discursive strategy which presents

the ‘archaic’ actions of the council as untenable ‘in this day and age’.³⁸ As Jim Earnshaw of the Harrogate District Trades Council notes of these local council decisions in a *Harrogate Advertiser* article, for instance: ‘It is time these petty politicians – and they are not all Tories – stopped playing God and found out what Harrogate wants in the 1980s’. Comments of this kind, I would argue, connect the emphasis placed, in some of these protesting comments and letters, on freedom of expression, choice and moral standards not just with ‘the legacy of the more permissive 1960s’ but, conversely, with the cultural climate of ‘the free market, released, unbound, deregulated’ that was being ushered in with the rise of Thatcherism in the early 1980s.³⁹ Indeed, the tangled political positions informing these local debates are also illustrated by the fact that, as my analysis has illustrated, Labour councillors and young Conservatives were both positioning themselves as defenders of *Life of Brian* and critics of local council committee decisions in local newspaper coverage of the *Brian* controversy.

RESISTANCE TACTIC 2: HIGHLIGHTING THE IMPACT ON LOCAL REPUTATION AND SATIRISING THEIR OPPONENTS

As acknowledged by a number of councillors and letter-writers who were against the banning of the film, the local fuss generated around the *Life of Brian* issue was ultimately beneficial in terms of generating heightened publicity for the film and encouraging more people to go and see it than might otherwise be the case. This was extremely good news for the cinemas in areas where the film was screened, or was screened after the council had seen and then approved the film. For instance, in cinemas in the Thanet district in Kent, the film was promoted, after the initial council ban on the film was over-turned, with the slogan ‘Have you seen *Monty Python’s Life of Brian*...Thanet District Council Have!!!’⁴⁰ Crucially, and as the previously cited piece by Sanjeev Baskhar noted, local people in areas where the film had

been banned, or where it was likely to be banned, organised coach trips to nearby areas where the film was being screened. So, to return to Baskhar's example of Exeter, after the film was passed for screening in the city, the *Exeter Express and Echo* referred to a statement, from cinema manager Walter Jones, that screenings of the film in one Exeter cinema were 'attracting full houses every night' and that the film was likely to 'run for 15 weeks or more in the city'. The newspaper reported that Mr Jones had attributed this to the publicity the film had received and the consequent coach-loads of people who were coming to Exeter screenings from places like Plymouth, where, like Dudley, the film had been banned after receiving an 'X' rating from the council.⁴¹ A similar situation occurred in Harrogate with determined film-goers organising coach-trips to Bradford, York or Leeds, and in Swansea, with coach-loads of Swansea residents travelling to Cardiff to see the film, leading to the *Life of Brian* being held over for a substantial number of weeks in cinemas in Cardiff because of this high demand. Crucially, in these cases, local newspapers seemed willing to support – and act as a gatekeeper or distributor of key information relating to – the organisation of these coach-trips and, more broadly, to encourage local people to go to adjacent towns and cities to see the film. So in the *Harrogate Advertiser*, for instance, an editorial piece on the *Life of Brian* ban ends with the editor commenting that 'if you want to know which cinemas are showing the film write to me for a reply under a plain cover!', or, in a later editorial, noting that 'on a point of information, anyone who still wants to see "Brian"...may do so at the ABC in Bradford. The last full performance starts at 8 p.m.'⁴²

However, if this is one way in which these local newspapers acted to promote and encourage a sense of a resistant local community through its dissemination of this information, then a key strand of debate across all three newspapers indicates that there was also a real sense of shame in the local community about this state of affairs. Clear concerns are registered in a

number of readers' letters, for instance, that the local bans would impact on businesses and trade in their local communities, as cinemagoers took their business elsewhere in order to see the film. As one Harrogate letter-writer noted, 'No doubt a number of Harrogate residents wishing to see the film will now be obliged to take their trade outside the community to any neighbouring town where, hopefully, Big Brother has not stepped in and banned it'.⁴³ While, in Dudley, the multi-faceted role of cinema in the local community as – in Rosalind Leveridge's words – not only a form of entertainment but also 'a building, a business, and a culture'⁴⁴ is foregrounded in a letter-writer's comment that 'when the local authority have forced regular Dudley cinema-goers to West Bromwich and Wolverhampton, will they support the only cinema left in Dudley, The Plaza, should sometime it decide to close through lack of support? Think carefully Dudley Council'.⁴⁵ Indeed, these council committees' decisions to put moral regulation above the protection of local cinema trade, at a time in the late 1970s when younger audiences were propping up otherwise ailing box office returns, led to cinema managers joining in with acts of local resistance. For instance, another cinema under Dudley council's jurisdiction, the Classic Cinema, Halesowen, organised and submitted to the council a 2176 signature petition asking for them to over-turn their original decision to award the film an 'X' and reinstate its original 'AA' certificate.⁴⁶

Alongside these arguments about impact on local trade, the banning of the film by local councils was also a source of concern in terms of the impact it could have on the broader cultural reputation of a local area and, potentially, how this might impact on promotion and tourism. In a *Harrogate Advertiser* editorial, for instance, it was noted that:

seldom is a chance missed to promote the name of Harrogate not only in this country, but also abroad. As far as I am concerned, the more people who have heard

about Harrogate the better for all of us. Of course the best form of publicity is that which is free as well as being complimentary. I doubt, though, whether the latest mention of Harrogate which has come to my attention will be entirely welcomed by the Council's Resort Services Department. I understand that the film-viewing sub-committee's decision...to prohibit the showing of 'Life of Brian' without even seeing it, has induced some cinemas in more enlightened areas to promote it as 'The film that's banned in Harrogate'.⁴⁷

Indeed, comparisons between the activities of their local authority and those 'in more enlightened areas' is made frequently by letter-writers and commentators in these local newspapers, clearly illustrating the ways in which, as Jancovich, Faire and Stubbings have argued, 'the spatial organisation of social relations...means that one must be careful about how one envisions place' as fundamentally 'every place is defined through its relation to other places'.⁴⁸ So, in a letter to the *South Wales Evening Post*, Wyndham Lewis of the Castle Cinema, Swansea states that 'most of the larger cities have not even requested a viewing...Cardiff is now showing the film for the fifth week, and there was no request by the Cardiff city council to see the film in advance', meaning that, as a reviewer observes in the film column in the same newspaper, 'it appears that we common breed of cinema-goers in Swansea are intellectually inferior to those elsewhere'.⁴⁹ Meanwhile, in the *Dudley Herald*, the newspaper's editor ends their editorial by commenting that 'a set-up where you can see a film in West Bromwich, Wolverhampton or Birmingham but must be over 18 to see it in Dudley is truly laughable. We are an island of self-righteousness!'⁵⁰

This conception of the local authorities' actions and their consequences as 'laughable' is in fact employed consistently by those mounting resistance to the *Life of Brian* bans, with

frequent references made, by these ban resisters, to Pythonesque humour. This emerges in a variety of ways in local newspaper discussions. Firstly, Monty Python is used as a reference point to highlight the ludicrous or farcical aspects of the council's activities and decisions. In particular, this is employed when addressing the fact that the banning of the film locally had led many to go and see the film in other areas. As one letter-writer observed in the *Harrogate Advertiser*, for instance, 'perhaps the Committee could spend a little time conscience-searching and ask themselves how many of the young people who have travelled to other towns to see this film did so because of the excessive publicity given by their inept bungling of the whole issue. Monty Python would be highly amused'.⁵¹

Secondly, and as illustrated in the earlier cited letter from a sixteen year old Swansea resident, the irony of the fact that those groups who the *Life of Brian* primarily satirised corresponded, in many ways, to those who had banned the film locally and their supporters is frequently drawn attention to. As one Harrogate letter-writer notes, for instance, "Life of Brian" is not making fun of Jesus but of a certain type of person who doesn't really exist but whose nearest parallels are The Bishop of Southwark, Basil Fawlty, Malcolm Muggeridge and presumably the councillors who banned the film'.⁵² Indeed, the frequent characterisation across local newspaper discourse of these council committees and their defenders as being 'blind, unquestioning and often hypocritical', and curbing, through their actions and arguments, opportunities for 'inquiry and thought', clearly corresponds to John Cleese's argument that the true target of satire in *Life of Brian* is 'closed systems of thought, whether they are political or theological or religious or whatever; systems by which whatever evidence is given to a person he merely adapts it, fits it into his ideology'.⁵³

Thirdly, a number of Harrogate letter-writers directly and astutely draw on Pythonesque humour, employing, in Roger Wilmut's terms, the Pythonesque technique of taking 'an idea, and then allow[ing] it to get wildly out of hand, so that absurdity builds on absurdity' in order to effectively satirise the insincerity and arrogance of the local committee decisions and the arguments of those who defend them.⁵⁴ In a letter dripping with hyperbole, for instance, one Harrogate patron states that 'myself, my friends and colleagues agree that thanks must be given to those who save us from the awful task of making up our own minds. Deciding between good and bad, right and wrong, decent and indecent must of course be the responsibility of professionals democratically elected for this awesome responsibility'.⁵⁵ Further to this, in a letter written in the Pythonesque satirical mode of what Marcia Landy would term a 'disgruntled, morally offended patron', another Harrogate resident satirises the moral logic and perceptions of contemporary cinema on which the local council committee's decision was based, by proclaiming that:

I write in praise of our great and good councillors for their splendid and timely action in banning Monty Python's 'Life of Brian'. Not since the Emperor Nero has such a threat been posed against Christianity as presented by this film, which I have not actually seen. There is no doubt that, were it to be shown in Harrogate, Christian Civilisation as we know it would vanish overnight, old ladies would be sold to white slavers, there would be human sacrifice on the Stray, and blood-crazed mobs of perverted young people would burn our churches to the ground. Only the brave action of our council, which knows what is best for us, has saved our community from universal chaos.⁵⁶

In Marcia Landy's book on *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, she notes that Monty Python had used television to satirise social institutions including 'the state's administration of social life', and that this had occurred at a time, in the early 1970s, 'of worldwide cultural transformations that increasingly challenged existing social and political institutions, opening the door...to more critical...approaches to questions of authority, gender, generation, sexuality, and national and regional identity'.⁵⁷ In this sense, the debates around *Life of Brian* in these local newspapers in 1979 and 1980 functioned as a key platform for articulating alternative local identities in the late 1970s and early 1980s – identities associated with the young, the cinephilic, and the critique of local governance. In turn, the processes and events outlined illustrate how Monty Python, and their provision of comic tools for the critique and parody of systems of authority, established thought and their potential hypocrisies, performed a crucial rhetorical function for local protestors against the *Life of Brian* ban in Harrogate, Swansea and Dudley at this time.

CONCLUSION

Despite the proposals put forward by the 1977 Williams Committee report on Obscenity and Film Censorship to scrap local authority censorship powers in the UK (a news item that was debated at length by all the local newspapers consulted in this article), the local film censorship system continues to remain in place at the time of writing. However, this is not to underestimate the kinds of impact that local resistance to the *Life of Brian* bans in Harrogate, Dudley, Swansea, and in many other towns and cities, had on the agendas, approaches and perceptions of local film censorship amongst many agents and stakeholders invested in film regulation at the tail end of the 1970s – or indeed to underestimate the value of the *Life of*

Brian case study in broadening and enriching scholarly understandings of past local film censorship activity in the UK.

Firstly, in March 1981, as the local furore around *Life of Brian* died down, Harrogate District Council approved the motion ‘that this Council shall disband its film censorship activities forthwith’, a motion which, as far as I’ve been able to ascertain, has been honoured up to the present.⁵⁸ Secondly, the arguments put forward by the *Life of Brian* local ban resisters also clearly impacted on the BBFC’s perceptions of the practices and membership of the committees charged with overseeing the regulation of cinema in each local area.

Accompanying his July 1980 letter to local authorities, for instance, James Ferman included a questionnaire, asking for further details of the qualifications of committee members relating ‘not only to age but to experience of the current cinema’ and citing the Williams Committee’s argument that ‘being often middle-aged and not cinema-goers’ local councillors ‘were liable to be out of touch with the contemporary cinema and the tastes of its predominantly young audiences’.⁵⁹ Here, then, is a key illustration of the way in which these local protests about ill-informed, out-of-touch councillors impacted on national conceptions of the local censorship process. Through these approaches, local people – including local cinemagoers, cinema managers, resisting councillors, and the local newspaper editors who gave this resistance a platform and a sustained sense of support – were able to defend the BBFC’s claim, in their original monthly bulletin report on *Life of Brian*, that the film’s satire and the social critique and debate that it generated was ‘surely permissible in a democratic society’, and to thus effectively question the suitability of those local council committee members who had been given the power to challenge this claim.⁶⁰

The third form of impact relates to ongoing scholarly understandings of local film censorship, and to a key point made in the introductory chapter of Annette Kuhn's groundbreaking 1988 book *Cinema, Censorship and Sexuality*. Here, Kuhn addresses what she sees as the key assumptions and oppositions that, for her at the time of publication, governed 'historical studies of censorship' and, more broadly, constructed 'the intellectual field of film history'. For her, at the centre of this, was:

an insistence upon a separation between social structures and institutions on the one hand and representations on the other, with a concomitant subordination of the latter to the former. This in turn produces a dichotomy which structures the entire field of film studies: the dualism of text and context. The text-context dualism constitutes film texts and the social, historical and institutional contexts in which films are produced, distributed and consumed as distinct objects of inquiry, so rendering virtually insurmountable the task of exploring, without recourse to determinism, their interaction.⁶¹

While Kuhn put forward this critique of film history scholarship in 1988, the issue of a 'text-context dualism' within film and cinema history remains a central topic of debate within more recent scholarship, with Daniela Treveri-Gennari and Sarah Culhane, for instance, recently addressing the need for scholars, within historical audience studies, to attempt to 'breakdown' – when relevant in historical case studies of film and the cinema – this opposition between context and text 'that typically characterises the approaches associated with new cinema history and film studies'.⁶² Through its mapping of the key discourses of resistance employed by local communities within the local press during the *Life of Brian* local censorship controversy, this article has shed light on a key example of a past film

ensorship controversy where the interaction of texts and contexts played an extremely pertinent role. During the course of this period of local debate around *Life of Brian* and its right to be seen or to be withheld, this text-context interaction clearly powered the arguments and strategies of resistance employed by members of the local community, who drew on Python's comedic logic in order to, like the Pythons themselves, 'challenge accepted views of how things are, including the role of authority'.⁶³

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