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Censorship and the creative process

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From the Banned Telefilm to the Feature Film: the Two Versions of Alan Clarke's *Scum* (1977-1979)

Du téléfilm censuré au long métrage de cinéma : les deux versions de Scum d'Alan Clarke (1977-1979)

Nicole Cloarec

- 1 Alan Clarke's *Scum* has become one of the *causes célèbres* of the British film and television industry. *Scum* is not the first, nor the last. *The War Game*, Peter Watkins's harrowing depiction of the after-effects of a nuclear disaster, blending fiction and documentary techniques, was originally produced in 1965 and banned for 20 years. Dennis Potter's *Brimstone and Treacle*, recorded in 1976 for BBC One's *Play for Today*, was deemed too disturbing and "nauseating"¹ as the main character appears to be the Devil himself, in human form, seducing a suburban family and raping their brain-damaged daughter; it was eventually broadcast in August 1987. Ken Loach has recurrently seen his films banned: as early as 1969 his documentary *Save the Children Fund Film* was denied broadcasting after the charity which partly funded it went to court and the same fate awaited *A Question of Leadership* (1981), a scathing documentary about the trade unions' betrayal of workers.² What makes *Scum* so unique, though, is that the banning of the telefilm³ led director Alan Clarke to shoot a remake for cinema release just two years later with virtually the same script and much of the same crew. After examining the historical facts regarding the censoring of the TV version, I will compare the two versions and show how the slight alterations but most of all the change of medium and its modalities of reception have shifted the emphasis of the debate.

The Ban in Context

- 2 *Scum* was first commissioned by BBC One as part of the prestigious *Play for Today* series. Like most of the *Play for Today* productions, it was first the project of the screenwriter, in

this case Roy Minton, who had already worked with Alan Clarke,⁴ and was known for his social commitment, using journalistic research and meticulous observation to give a voice to society's most marginalised figures. In the case of *Scum*, Minton met ex-borstal "trainees", as the inmates of these young offenders' prisons were then euphemistically called. Both Minton and Clarke refused to indulge in contrived narratives and believed the best way to denounce the violence inherent in the borstal system was to show it in the raw.

- 3 The script was one of the first Margaret Matheson received as newly-appointed producer for *Play for Today* and she recalls: "It was certainly my ambition to produce drama that was strong meat, drama that was focused on very public subjects of interest".⁵ She wrote an early synopsis in which she was very careful to include a detailed description of every scene so as to pre-empt any trouble further down the line. The project was signed off by Head of Plays James Cellan-Jones and the film was shot with no interference. Then in July 1977, after production and a few weeks prior to transmission which was already advertised in *Radio Times*, Bill Cotton, who had just taken over as Controller of BBC One, demanded to see it. The first reaction was to ask for cuts,⁶ which were agreed upon, but the film still had to be shown to a group of Home Office people, governors and warders. Margaret Matheson recalls:

Milne showed the film to a couple of people, notably David Rose, the Head of Drama in Birmingham, and to Tom Mangold, who was a *Panorama* reporter then doing something about prisons and very in with the Home Office. David Rose didn't think the film should be shown, certainly not in the form it was in. And Tom Mangold said it wasn't true. His line was that it wasn't that any of these things couldn't happen in such an institution, it was just that they couldn't all happen in the space of seventy-five minutes. Well you think 'welcome to dramatic fiction!'⁷

- 4 Needless to say, the main objection that there were too many incidents packed into the 75-minute running time was obviously and utterly ridiculous since that precisely is the definition of dramatic fiction. This of course highlights the arbitrariness of censorship: when a reason is provided, as far as it is stated, it is clearly wanting, leaving many of the true motives unsaid. It is quite impossible to know what precisely made the BBC managers take their decision and to what extent their decision was forced upon them.⁸
- 5 What is certain, though, is that, although the BBC is theoretically an independent body and has had a fine tradition of defending difficult works, it is ultimately dependent on government since the latter controls the level of BBC licence fee and the renewal of its Charter. Until May 1992, television broadcasting was under the supervision of the Home Office⁹ and the BBC directors might well have been reluctant to bring themselves into confrontation with the government by broadcasting a film openly critical of Home Office institutions, all the more so since 1977 was the year when the ten-year Royal Charter was being renewed.¹⁰ On top of that, according to Roy Minton, newly-appointed BBC One controller Bill Cotton might have had some vested interest as he also was a magistrate.¹¹ A more generous interpretation would be that Cotton, who himself had supported the creation of such programmes as *Dad's Army* which in 1968 was facing opposition because of fears it would cause offence,¹² simply found himself operating outside his normal field of light entertainment and was following the strict BBC programme guidelines as a public service, according to which nothing could be broadcast that was in bad taste or offensive to public feeling, even though what the standards of taste and decency should be was never made explicit.¹³

The Power of the Medium

- 6 Nevertheless, beyond the specific historical and personal factors, the case reveals a number of recurring aspects characteristic of censorship in the British film and television industry. Both in feature films or on television, the depiction of juvenile crime and prison systems has always proved controversial and subject to restriction – from *Cosh Boy* (Lewis Gilbert, 1953), the first X-certificate British film, to *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (Tony Richardson, 1962), which was also certified X,¹⁴ and Tony Parker’s adaptation for *The Wednesday Play* of his book of interviews with women who had been in prison, a film that was produced by Tony Garnett and directed by Roy Battersby in 1967 but never shown in its original form.¹⁵ In a letter to *Radio Times*, Tony Garnett, along with other TV producers, screenwriters and directors, drew attention to the ban: “The BBC has never given a clear reason for banning this show. After more than twelve months of conversations and correspondence with the BBC, the writer, the director and the producer are still mystified”. They could only speculate that its use of actresses was so convincing that “despite the end credits to artists, and front titles identifying it as a *Wednesday Play* by an author and a *Radio Times* billing doing both, the BBC decided that viewers might be misled into thinking it was real!”¹⁶
- 7 Likewise for *Scum*, if we decode the alleged reason for banning the film, what most annoyed the authorities was precisely the fact that the visual quality it adopted was similar to a documentary. As Julian Petley remarks:
- One of the longest-running controversies to have raged around British television concerns dramatised documentaries and documentary dramas – two very different kinds of programme format, but both charged with confusing viewers by “illegitimately” mingling fact and fiction.¹⁷
- 8 Petley goes on to point out that the charge is always wheeled out extremely selectively against programmes which challenge the *status quo* or, as Ken Loach judiciously wrote in a reply to *The Daily Telegraph*’s campaign against *Days of Hope* (1975): “Criticisms about confusing fact with fiction are reserved by certain papers for political films but ignored when Edward VIII or Churchill’s mother are romanticised and glorified”.¹⁸ This cannot be denied but I would argue that what makes the content so powerful and disturbing is precisely the choice of realist aesthetics. To quote T. C. Worsley: “A new form is a new way of breaking through: it can be very disturbing just in itself”.¹⁹ Here, as in many other instances of censored works of art, the censors fully acknowledged the specific power of the medium.
- 9 Indeed, *Scum* uses raw acting and filming, with a cast of yet unknown young actors and very clinical camerawork which gives the piece the feel of a documentary. Most of the film consists in static medium shots showing trainees in between guards, behind bars, in long narrow corridors, with a few handheld camera movements to accompany the characters’ limited movements in the institutionalized Victorian building used for setting. Confinement is further enhanced by the extreme scarcity of exterior shots and the bleak lighting coming from the windows, highlighting the contrast between inner and outer space. Action is depicted in a sparse observational style which holds back any dramatic or sensational treatment, systematically eschewing any introductory or conclusive shots. Violence is thus conveyed in short, terse action which appears very much part of the routine. But what is ultimately most upsetting in this stark, unflinching

portrayal of life in a borstal is that the regime of violence, bullying and racism is not only cynically condoned by the guards and prison directors but positively encouraged to uphold the “natural” hierarchies that emerge in lockdown.²⁰ At best, prison staff are carelessly ineffective; at worst, they are sadistically enjoying themselves. No wonder this ruthless depiction of a system that brutalises all, destroys the weakest and turns the strongest into hardened criminals was deemed unacceptable for a British audience: too bleak, too despondent, too anti-establishment.

Response to the Ban

- 10 In response to the ban, Margaret Matheson organised a screening for the press in Soho, much to the annoyance of the BBC. The story got the front page and there was a general outcry at BBC’s decision. Among the audience was film producer Clive Parsons who was, in his own words, “blown away” and wanted Clarke to re-shoot it as a feature film.²¹ According to Don Boyd, the film’s executive producer, Alan Clarke’s first temptation was to rewrite the script to make the story more spectacular. This version, which came to be known as “the black version”, infuriated screenwriter Roy Minton so much that Clarke resorted back to the first draft, but he nevertheless lost Minton’s friendship as collateral damage.²²
- 11 All in all, the film version uses virtually the same script and much of the same cast,²³ but in comparison to the television version, it is astonishing how slight alterations changed the general perspective of the narrative. The cinema version is 18 minutes longer (a total of 93 minutes); it does contain a few additional scenes²⁴ but the difference is mainly due to longer scenes: unlike the terse editing of the telefilm, most scenes start with a sort of prologue prior to the action and linger afterwards on its effect, as with the close shots of Carlin’s grin of hatred after being thrown into solitary. Unsurprisingly, the film uses more camera movements and a wider range of shots. Filmed at a partly disused mental hospital, the setting is wider, providing a more varied and balanced treatment of space. There are more exterior scenes, although shot in a bleak, blue, English winter light with snow-covered landscape. More surprisingly, the film displays more guiding work from camera movements and editing: one example of ironical commentary is the shot starting with a close up of Archer’s naked feet and developing through a tilt up to a close up of the Governor’s eyes (0:29); another example is the mirror-effect conveyed by the circular movement of the camera encompassing both the Housemaster and Carlin as the former devolves some of his power to the latter. What is more, the performances of the leading actors are more confident,²⁵ their acting more aggressive. Ray Winstone, who played Carlin in both films, remarks:
- I really liked the original, because we were younger, there was something about that that made it seem more violent, more terrifying. We were vulnerable kids, being abused by men and then abusing each other — in every way, violently, mentally, sexually, the lot in a fucking Victorian building. We were kids in the feature films but in two years we grew up, we weren’t so vulnerable any more.²⁶
- 12 It is worth noting that the only omission in the second version is the scene when a bashful Carlin tells another inmate that “he is no poof” but needs a “missus” for company. Ray Winstone later explained he was feeling uncomfortable with the scene, “probably feeling a bit macho at the time”,²⁷ and regretted the change. But the omission certainly added to the toughening of the character.

Shift of Emphasis

- 13 As a consequence, violence is given a much more spectacular treatment: in addition to Ray Winstone's more aggressive acting, the film resorts to a quicker, brisker editing with close ups of distorted faces and low angle shots which magnify the aggressor. In other words, the camera tends to take part in the action whereas in the TV version it remains as observational as possible, eschewing any involvement through movement or editing within a scene. I will focus on just two striking instances:²⁸ the first comparing the beating of Carlin by Pongo Banks, the incumbent Daddy, and his cronies; the second comparing Carlin getting his own back on Pongo (0:39). In the first scene the film version uses a wider range of shots with a quicker editing that isolates close-ups of faces; in the second scene, the film version expands time and builds up tension with one early example of a long hand-held tracking shot that follows a character, effectively involving an often reluctant viewer (these long hand-held tracking shots have since become one of Clarke's trademarks). In both cases, the fragmentation of action in the film version creates drama and heightens emotional effects. What is more, the choice of close framing and camera movements brings about the viewers' involvement in the action, forsaking an analytical stand to trigger pure affects and invite more visceral reactions. Similarly, the suicide scene is a little longer²⁹ and more dramatic, with more close ups on Davis's face expressing despair and even a graphic use of blood seeping through the sheets.
- 14 But most importantly, the focus of this violence is shifted, as it were, from the warders to the inmates. In this respect, the difference of the opening scenes is quite telling: in the television version, the scene is filmed from the warders' car chasing one of the "trainees" running loose in a field. The camera adopts the warders' viewpoint, much to the discomfort of the viewer. The warders' actions are given prominence from the start, and will be questioned throughout the film. The cinema version, on the other hand, opens with a close shot of Carlin's face, followed by close shots of two other trainees, as they are sitting in a police van. This may be a tribute paid to another borstal film, Tony Richardson's classic *The Solitude of the Long Distance Runner*, and places the emphasis on the inmates themselves. But while the TV film offered the depiction of a group, the film version gives more prominence to Carlin and Archer, who both personify a different type of rebellion.
- 15 The shift of focus is quite obvious in the harrowing rape scene. In the television version, the scene is filmed in medium shots and most of it remains off screen while the camera frames one of the warders watching from behind the glass window of the greenhouse; in the film version, the scene of Davis's rape lasts longer³⁰ and details the revolting violence between the inmates through close shots of Davis's and his aggressors' faces, all distorted by agony or aggressiveness. In comparison, the shots of the warder watching the scene seem short and incidental.³¹
- 16 In short, the television version stresses over and over the most disturbing implication and complacent manipulation of the warders. One scene illustrates this point almost literally: the so-called "murder ball" game. In the TV film all trainees wear shorts and white T-shirts, no real team seems to be formed; in the film version half of the inmates wear white T-shirts while the other half wear blue ones, clearly defining two teams. Even if the outcome of the game is still the same (a huge scrum which is a pretext for outbursts of racial violence), its visual effect is quite different: in the TV version, the arbitrariness

of the game is underlined, the inmates being as it were mere pawns in the warders' sadistic game of power.

- 17 Admittedly, the cinema version still presents a ruthless depiction of the violence and corruption pervading life in borstals and the endings of both versions are equally powerful with the sudden explosion of violence from the inmates after Davis's suicide and the shockingly brutal reestablishment of order. But although Alan Clarke adamantly refused to go as far as adding a music score, violence in the film version was given a much more spectacular treatment. At the end of a decade in which violence was becoming a standard feature of cinema, with films such as *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1975) or *Death Wish* (Michael Winner, 1974), it is little wonder the film was misunderstood. The film version became an instant underground classic, with youngsters repeating the now infamous lines "I'm the daddy now" or "where's your tool?" like mantras. Don Boyd, executive producer, reports that at the première of the film in London, something horrible happened in the fully packed theatre: at the scene in which Carlin confronts the Black Daddy and beats him up, the audience cheered.³²
- 18 I would therefore argue that if the remake of *Scum* may first seem to have defeated censorship, the row its ban provoked and its immediate status as a cult movie ultimately colluded with censorship in diverting attention away from the real subject, namely the appalling conditions of life in borstals and its perverse effects. Harsh though the indictment of the prison system is in the film, controversy settled on the more "traditional" debate over the depiction of violence in films³³ — an altogether unremarkable debate at the end of a decade which saw the release of *A Clockwork Orange* (Stanley Kubrick, 1971), *Straw Dogs* (Sam Peckinpah, 1971) and the active lobbying of the Mary Whitehouse brigade.³⁴

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NOTES

1. Alasdair Milne, Managing Director of BBC Television in 1977, quoted on the back cover of the BBC DVD version, 2004.
2. *Save the Children Fund Film* was eventually screened for the first time at the British Film Institute in September 2011 as part of a major retrospective celebrating Loach's 75th birthday: see <<http://www.bfi.org.uk/live/video/700>> accessed May 24 2013; *A Question of Leadership* can be watched on youtube (uploaded by KenLoachFilms in July 2010) in the UK only. <<http://www.youtube.com/movie?feature=plcp&v=7pA4s30TzS0>>.
3. It was effectively banned from broadcast until 1991 a year after Clarke's death, when it was finally screened on Channel Four as part of a season on the theme of censorship.
4. Alan Clarke and Roy Minton collaborated on *Horace* (1972) and *Funny Farm* (1975) which constitute with *Scum* "a fierce championing of some of the most neglected and despised members of our society: the backward and the afflicted, the uneducated and the institutionalized". Richard Kelly, *Alan Clarke*, London: Faber & Faber, 1998, xviii.
5. R. Kelly, *op. cit.*, 94.
6. The demands included cutting one of the two suicides, cutting the moment of impact when Carlin hits Richards across the face with the snooker balls in a sock and shortening the rape of Davis in the greenhouse.
7. R. Kelly, *op. cit.*, 104.
8. David Hare expressed a scathing criticism: "I would stand by what I said at Alan's memorial service, 'Along the fault line created by the banning of *Scum* flowed all the lousy decisions and abject behaviour which left the BBC ten years later having to fight to justify its very existence to government'". *Ibidem*, 105.
9. In May 1992 television broadcasting came under the supervision of the Department of National Heritage then in 1997 of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. Until 1969 it had been the responsibility of the Postmaster General.
10. The BBC has operated since its creation in 1927 under a Royal Charter as a public corporation. The Charter is renewed every 10 years.
11. R. Kelly, *op. cit.*, 104.
12. David Croft, writer of *Dad's Army*, recalls: "Without him I don't think the show would have gone on. He was a wonderful showman and a great believer in his producers and he backed us absolutely to the hilt". "Tributes paid to BBC TV's Cotton", BBC News, 12 August 2008.
13. Charles Curran, Director-General of the BBC in 1972, reasserted: "[The BBC] is providing a service; it is not setting itself up as an arbiter of taste or a manipulator of society. But if it is doing its job responsibly and well it will give its audiences a clear picture of the prevailing scale of values within society, and will reflect the order in which society as a whole (often described as "the consensus") classifies those values". *BBC Handbook 1973*, British Broadcasting Corporation, 1972.

14. Alan Sillitoe “was increasingly viewed by some BBFC examiners as a ‘socially irresponsible’ writer”. Anthony Aldgate, *Censorship and the Permissive Society. British Cinema and Theatre 1955-1965*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1995, 99.
15. It was eventually screened after drastic cuts and alterations which led its makers to change its name from *Women in Crime* to *Some Women* (BBC, 1969). See John Hill, “From *Five Women* to *Leeds United!*: Roy Battersby and the Politics of ‘Radical’ Television Drama” in *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, Volume 10.2, January 2013, 130-50.
16. “A Letter to the Editor”, jointly signed by Tony Garnett, Roy Battersby, Ken Loach, Jim Allen, Clive Goodwin, James MacTaggart, Roger Smith and Kenith Trodd, *Radio Times*, 13 February 1969, 2.
17. Julian Petley, “Factual fictions and fictional fallacies: Ken Loach’s documentary dramas”, in George McKnight (ed.), *Agent of Challenge and Defiance: the Films of Ken Loach*, Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1997, 28.
18. *Ibidem*, 47.
19. T. C. Worsley, *Television: The Ephemeral Art*, London: Alan Ross, 1970, 230.
20. After Carlin has beaten up Pongo, the former “Daddy”, the housemaster warns him: “I run this wing. Natural leaders will emerge. Leadership means order. Nobody rocks my boat. Do we understand each other?”
21. “Then there was this odd period for us when naturally the people who had been involved in the TV version were very keen to persuade the BBC to broadcast it and we were the opposite, because we saw it could be a terrific movie. The BBC had a very odd contract with writers which basically said if we have not made it and transmitted it by a certain date, the rights return to you”. R. Kelly, *op. cit.*, 118.
22. See interview with Roy Minton in the extra features of the BBC DVD, 2004.
23. One notable exception is the part of Archer first played by David Threlfall and taken over by Mick Ford.
24. Additional scenes include Davis crying alone at night in his cell right from the beginning of the film (0:13), Archer in the library (0:14) complaining to Matron about the choice of books (“Archer, read them or not, *Crime and Punishment* and *The Idiot* are hardly suitable reading matter for a young boy in this establishment”), Toyne going berserk and cutting open his veins, screaming and holding the bars (1:06).
25. Archer, who is very much the mouthpiece for Minton’s and Clarke’s anarchic views, is in both versions endowed with a superior intellect and taunts the authorities with bizarre personal habits such as a request for vegetarian food or a budding interest in Mecca which infuriates the bigoted Governor. Mick Ford embodies the character with even more cocksure arrogance and detached world-weariness.
26. R. Kelly, *op. cit.*, 124. Phil Daniels who also played in both versions recalls: “It was different doing it over again, that rawness wasn’t there. And because it was a movie they threw it all in, all the suicides, all the buggings”. *Ibidem*, 123.
27. *Ibid.*, 125.
28. Carlin’s beating the Black Daddy (0:52) would be another example.
29. Respectively 3 minutes 12 seconds and 4 minutes 20 seconds. The suicide scene in the TV version is nevertheless one of the longest in the film, with a slow build-up of despair which proves very effective.

30. 2 minutes in the TV version and 3 minutes 35 seconds in the film.

31. Another illustration of the warders' sadistic pleasure of watching the inmates inflicting violence on each other is the notorious scene of Carlin's beating the Black "Daddy". In both versions, the editing makes it clear the warder is willing to turn a blind eye but whereas in the film version the warder remains filmed in medium shot, as if from Carlin's point of view, in the television version, the scene ends with a close shot of the warder grinning.

32. See interview with Don Boyd in the extra features of the BBC DVD, 2004.

33. Davina Belling reports: "I don't know whether we were all naïve at the time but when the film came out we were all very shocked at the reaction, that we were so vilified for making a film that certainly in the public's eyes at the point, actually promoted and incited violence". R. Kelly, *op. cit.*, 118.

34. Mary Whitehouse was a self-appointed censor who launched herself on the public scene in the 1960s leading a campaign "against the perceived permissiveness of the era and, particularly, against what she saw as an abandonment of standards at the BBC. By the 1970s "the tide showed signs of turning against liberalism". She "was prompted by 'the irreverence of the late-night 'satire' shows, and by the kind of plays put out by the BBC" which she insisted "played havoc with everything that the vast majority of people hold dear". Alwyn W. Turner *Crisis? What crisis? Britain in the 1970s*, London: Aurum, 2008, 132-133. Whitehouse initiated what was first known as the Clean-Up TV Campaign and later became the National Viewers' and Listeners' Association (NVALA). It is now enjoying a third life as Mediawatch-uk.

ABSTRACTS

Alan Clarke's *Scum*, originally made for the BBC's Play for Today series in 1977, has become a cause célèbre in the history of film censorship. Although the film had already been scheduled, it was eventually banned and only broadcast in 1991, a year after the director's death. How the decision was reached remains unclear but there is no denying that the film was deemed too controversial both by the Home Office and the newly-appointed BBC One controller Bill Cotton. *Scum* is set in a borstal, the name given to institutions for young offenders (a system that was to be abolished in 1982), and depicts life under a daily regimen of violence, bullying and racism. In response to the censoring of the original TV version, director Alan Clarke and screenwriter Roy Minton decided to re-shoot the film two years later for cinema release. Starting with a comparison between the two versions we will examine the different modalities of production and reception related to the two different media (television and cinema). Then we will analyse what makes the representation of a sensitive question such as living conditions in a borstal acceptable or not, considering the degrees of fictionalisation of the representation.

Le film d'Alan Clarke *Scum*, réalisé en 1977 dans le cadre de la série BBC Play for Today, est devenu un cas célèbre de censure exercée par la chaîne publique britannique. Alors que sa diffusion sur le petit écran était déjà programmée, le film fut finalement censuré et ne put être

retransmis qu'en 1991, un an après la mort du metteur en scène. Les circonstances précises de cette interdiction restent obscures mais il ne fait pas de doute que le téléfilm fut jugé trop polémique à la fois par le Home Office et Billy Cotton qui venait d'être nommé Contrôleur à la BBC One. De fait, *Scum* se situe dans un « borstal », nom donné aux institutions pour jeunes délinquants (institutions qui seront abolies en 1982) et dépeint la vie de ces jeunes soumis à un régime quotidien de violences, de brimades et de racisme. En réponse à la censure touchant le téléfilm, Alan Clarke et le scénariste Roy Minton décidèrent deux ans plus tard de tourner à nouveau le film cette fois pour le grand écran. Partant d'une comparaison des deux versions, nous examinerons les différentes modalités de production et de réception respectives aux deux média (télévision et cinéma) puis nous analyserons comment la représentation d'un sujet aussi sensible que la vie dans un « borstal » est traitée, ce qui la rend acceptable ou non selon son degré de fictionnalisation.

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Mots-clés: cinéma britannique, télévision britannique, censure, Clarke Alan, délinquance juvénile

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Nicole Cloarec is a Lecturer in English at Rennes 1 University. She is the author of a doctoral thesis on Peter Greenaway's films and a number of articles on British and American cinema. Her latest research focuses on the cinema of Derek Jarman, the Quay brothers, Guy Maddin and British women filmmakers.