

***Victim* (1961): Text and Context**

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Victim (1961) was the first commercial film in Britain to deal openly with the need for legal reform concerning homosexuality and was in accord with the recommendations of the Wolfenden Committee, which had examined homosexual offences and prostitution and reported in 1957. The film has attracted much criticism and debate, largely in terms of its liberal prescriptions and its 'timid' handling of a controversial theme. There has been no detailed attempt to consider this singular production in terms of the considerable pressures of its own time and appreciate the restrictions under which the filmmakers operated. The research draws on various documents relating to the *Wolfenden Report*, public opinion, censorship, and the production and reception of *Victim*, in the process constructing a more sympathetic and complex picture regarding the limits to the representation of homosexuality on British cinema screens in the early 1960s. The study concludes with an examination of some recent research into audience response to the film, which tends to confirm that *Victim* had a significant impact on gay men who struggled with their identity and subjectivity at a time when their sexuality was potentially illegal and could result in a long term of imprisonment with hard labour.

If a man in a responsible position is convicted he will be utterly crushed. Whatever he does he cannot recover, even if the charge is (criminally speaking) of less gravity than dangerous driving. Killing a person on the road by driving while drunk costs you neither job nor friends. But loving a man of twenty-one or more can be a crime for which there is no forgiveness. (Quoted in Hauser 1962: 99)

Victim is widely recognised as a landmark film in British cinema.¹ It was directed by Basil Dearden and produced by Michael Relph, an experienced

1 This status is confirmed by a number of writers in the essays collected in Griffiths (2006).

team of filmmakers well-known for their pioneering ‘social problem’ films in the post-war period.² *The Blue Lamp* (1950), *I Believe in You* (1952) and *Violent Playground* (1957) essayed the troubling figure of the juvenile delinquent; while *Sapphire* (1959), released in the wake of major disturbances in Nottingham and Notting Hill, London, dealt with racial tension and intolerance (Hill 1986: 67–95). *Victim*, given the social climate, was a daring treatment of the broadly perceived ‘social problem’ of homosexuality, brought into acute focus following the publication of the *Report of the Departmental Committee on Homosexual Offences and Prostitution* in 1957.³ Previously, homosexuality had been a taboo subject for British films, but since *Wolfenden* a few films had shown some courage and introduced the theme obliquely as in *Serious Charge* (1959), or displaced the incendiary material into the relative safety of historical distance and celebrity, as in *Oscar Wilde* (1959) and *The Trials of Oscar Wilde* (1960). *Victim* was distinct in that it was a contemporary drama which made homosexuality the unambiguous focus of its narrative.

Unsurprisingly, *Victim* has attracted critical attention and two articles are now appreciated as canonical writings on British cinema. Richard Dyer’s “*Victim*: hegemonic project” first appeared in *Film Form* 2 (1977),⁴ and was characteristic of film studies as it developed in the seventies in its concern with the particular “organisation of codes and conventions which gives warrant for certain kinds of reading on the part of its audience”. That is, it sought to reveal how a film like *Victim* represented “a particular set of encodings which makes possible particular decodings”; for Dyer “the project of a film like *Victim* is to create a ‘unified’ or ‘organic’ artefact” (2002: 71). This general set of concerns regarding the “hegemonic project” of commercial narrative cinema – targeted here onto the specific text of *Victim* – rather elided the matter of the social and cultural significance of the film. In his theoretical concern with the possible variations in reading (decoding) the film, Dyer raised the issue of situating these potential readings historically, but concluded: “To know which of these various readings predominated in the years of the film’s release we would need to insert this analysis into the kind of social history of the period we do not yet have” (2002: 87).

Writing several years later, Andy Medhurst addressed this omission in his “*Victim*: Text as Context”, published in *Screen* in 1984.⁵ He consciously offered his article as a corrective to the “textual formalism” of the 1970s, arguing that “films need to be carefully located in the cultural and historical

2 Overviews of the cinema of Dearden and Relph can be found in Burton, O’Sullivan and Wells (1997) and Burton and O’Sullivan (2009).

3 Commonly known as the *Wolfenden Report* after its chairman John Wolfenden.

4 The article was later anthologised in Dyer (1993/2002).

5 The article was later anthologised in Higson (1996).

circumstances of their moment of production" (1996: 118). His (unsurprising) conclusion was that *Victim* reflected the recommendations of *Wolfenden* and its plea for liberal tolerance; for Medhurst, an uneasy position "advocating legal change without being seen to "approve of" homosexuality" (1996: 126). A major concern of his intervention, again in keeping with the temper of film studies at the time, was to read the film 'against the grain' and reveal its unintentional 'comparative radicalism' as a film advocating 'coming out'. As he argued: "I want to indicate those moments in the text when the maintenance of its inscribed liberalism fails, and when what I see as the discourse of homosexual desire [...] emerges" (1996: 127).

The view that the social problem films of Dearden and Relph embodied the failure of liberalism to deal adequately with the social disruptions thrown-up in the post-war settlement has widely dominated; the liberal totems of sympathy, compassion, tolerance and good-will being appreciated as insufficient to deal with the social realities of prejudice, inequality and discrimination. In his influential study of the British social problem film, John Hill suggests that the films "may well have obscured as much as they enlightened, and obstructed as much as they initiated the potential for social change and reconstruction" (1986: 3). The established critiques of *Victim* and the social problem film, emerging as they did from the agenda of gay radicalism and the post-Marxism of the New Left, are historically insensitive and suffer from a normative 'reading backwards' onto the texts, a retrospective imposition of values onto the films that had little or no relevance at the time of their release. It is not my intention to dismiss or invalidate the critical approaches offered by Medhurst and Hill, for they illuminate 'possibilities' in the meanings of the texts and helpfully comment on much larger trends in social and cultural history after the 'fact' of the films. What I will offer, instead, is a careful consideration of the 'moment' of *Victim*, an attempt to understand the film's liberal humanism historically and not critically, and to accept the limits imposed by commercial film production and public opinion. The study will draw on a range of contemporary documentation, as well as recent criticism which tends to offer a more sympathetic view of the film.

"Timid Wolfendenism"⁶

Unless a deliberate attempt is to be made by society, acting through the agency of the law, to equate the sphere of crime with that of sin, there must remain a realm of private morality and immorality which is, in brief and crude terms, not the law's business. To say this is not to condone or encourage private immorality. On the contrary, to emphasise the personal and private

6 The judgement is Medhurst's (1996: 129).

nature of moral or immoral conduct is to emphasise the personal and private responsibility of the individual for his own actions, and that is a responsibility which a mature agent can properly be expected to carry for himself without the threat of punishment from the law. (*The Wolfenden Report on Homosexual Offences*, 1957, para. 61)

In August 1954, the British government established the Home Office Departmental Committee on Prostitution and Homosexuality. This reported in September 1957, generating “a major debate on male homosexuality in British society during the late 1950s and 1960s, the first time that this issue had ever been the subject of prolonged public discussion in British history” (Higgins 1996: 2).⁷ The post-war period had been marked by some high-profile prosecutions of homosexuals and consequent sensationalist coverage in the popular press – “what might best be termed a tabloid discourse of homosexuality, a strategy dedicated to uncovering, naming and codifying homosexual lives for popular consumption” (Waters 1999: 139).⁸ This led much intelligent opinion to support a dispassionate survey that could be of value in educating an ill-informed public and bring a measure of liberalisation to what some considered outdated laws.⁹ The medieval severity of the legal code dealing with male homosexuality had been attenuated by the law of 1861, the last occasion for reform, wherein a capital sentence for sodomy was commuted to life imprisonment. The comparatively enlightened recommendation of the *Wolfenden Report* was to decriminalise homosexual activity between two consenting adults as long as it was conducted in private.¹⁰ Much of the subsequent commentary on the Committee and its proposals has focused on its construction of the ‘good’ homosexual and its contrary identification and vilification of unacceptable homosexual behaviour. As Higgins notes: “The only praise given, and then often grudgingly, was to the celibate who sublimated his desires (preferably in work) and never owned up to what stirred his passions, what was usually called the ‘controlled homosexual’” (1996: 19).

Various ‘representational strategies’ competed to provide the dominant portrait of the homosexual in the 1950s.¹¹ On one side, elements of the popular press, in their broader offensive against vice, competed with each

7 For welcoming and supportive viewpoints see Hammelmann (1958).

8 Increased zeal by the police saw the annual number of prosecutions of male homosexual offences rise from 800 in 1945 to 2,500 in 1955 (McLaren 2002: 223).

9 Chis Waters evokes the “complex equation of moral decline, demographic anxiety and homosexual panic” to explain the social outcry (1999: 138).

10 For a detailed legal treatment of the law relating to homosexuality in Britain, and one informed by modern critical theory, see Moran (1996). For a historical and cultural overview of “queer sociability” in London up to *Wolfenden*, see Houlbrook (2005).

11 In this context, see the discussion of the landmark novel *The Heart in Exile* published in Britain in 1953 and its representation of the “homosexual underworld” (Houlbrook and Waters 2006).

other to expose the “Evil Men” and root out the “moral rot”;¹² while a counter-veiling progressive discourse prescribed therapy rather than punishment, with expert knowledge directed towards the need for law reform.¹³ The latter invoked the findings of the *Kinsey Report on Male Sexuality* (America, 1948) to demonstrate the widespread nature of male homosexuality and praised it as a model of statistical pertinence and sober discussion. In a similar vein, “frank and penetrating” appraisals aimed for a sympathetic understanding of the individual and the problem, as with Gordon Westwood’s *Society and the Homosexual* (1952);¹⁴ while numerous contributions to learned journals generally aired the ‘problem’, often interjecting an enlightened opinion, as in the case of Dr Laidlaw, writing in *Marriage and Family Living*, who argued that “[t]he life of the homosexual is, at best, a hard and difficult one in our culture. It is our duty, as mature individuals, to bring to the homosexual sympathetic understanding and a helping hand, rather than social ostracism” (1952: 45). As a number of commentators have remarked, the publication by Peter Wildeblood of *Against the Law* (1955), recounting his sensational trial and conviction for indecency in the previous year, was a crucial intervention into the growing debate regarding legal change.¹⁵ It has been described as “perhaps the first book ever published in Britain by a male homosexual who openly used his name, who offered a frank story of his life and who argued forcefully for rights for other men like himself” (Waters 1999: 150). In his account, Wildeblood, later a witness to the Wolfenden Committee, constructed the figure of the ‘respectable’ homosexual, hardly distinguishable from ‘normal’ men, one in sharp contrast to the “pathetically flamboyant pansy with flapping wrists”. “Most of us are not like that” he pleaded: “We do our best to look like everyone else, and we usually succeed” (quoted in Waters 1999: 145). Much of the evidence presented to the Wolfenden Committee pronounced the objectionable behaviour and appearance of effeminate men, who, in the popular imagination, were inclined to promiscuity; and in their refusal to pattern their relationships on the ‘heterosexual ideal’, offered “the greatest challenge to the social ideal of “normal” heterosexuality”. In contrast, there was an emergent view of the ‘good homosexual’, someone who was “allowed to find one partner from the same class and same age band as himself and settle down to a chaste life faithful to that one partner”:

12 The three-part series “Evil Men” was carried by the *Sunday Pictorial* in May 1952.

13 McLaren has argued that the “top people’s” newspapers showed greater concern for the fact of blackmail, and how the present law disadvantaged the elite, targeting them as potential victims of blackmailers (2002: 228–29).

14 The comments appear on the jacket of the American edition (1953).

15 The trial also included a peer of the realm, the third Baron Montagu of Beaulieu, who had narrowly escaped conviction for an earlier charge some months previously. This time he was jailed for a year.

Sir Theobald Mathew, Director of Public Prosecutions, knew men like this and regarded them as offering no challenge to society as long as they lived discreetly. According to Dr Eustace Chesser, 'the normal homosexual – in other words, the homosexual who behaves with another homosexual in a normal manner, here you have a parallel with the heterosexual as well'. The bad homosexual, the pseudo-homosexual as he was sometimes called, challenged that ideal. That was his greatest crime. (Higgins 1996: 23)¹⁶

The recommendations of the *Wolfenden Report* to remove from the statutes some elements of homosexual offences represented progressive thinking somewhat in advance of public opinion. This is apparent in the Government's guarded response to the recommendations, and Sir John Wolfenden, for one, became impatient with its tawdriness, believing the inaction was due to a fear of the political consequences.¹⁷ Other members of the Committee expressed disappointment at the lack of debate offered the findings in Parliament: Sir Hugh Linstead bemoaned the "conspiracy of silence" on the part of the Government, official Opposition and the general public; and Mr Victor Mischon expressed the "great pity that politics as such is allowed to bedevil the various issues that were brought out in the report. I had hoped that a brave and progressive legislature would have acted". The Political Correspondent of *The Times* sagely concluded the account with the judgement that:

There is a possibility that the Government will introduce legislation dealing with the laws relating to prostitution in the new session. Here they will take the Wolfenden recommendations as their guide. But legislation on homosexuality is not likely [...] The Government's view is that although the committee's recommendations on homosexuality are logical enough, they are very much ahead of public opinion. (4 September 1958)¹⁸

16 Dr Eustace Chesser had published widely on sexual matters, including *Live and Let Live. The Moral of the Wolfenden Report* (1958), which carried a Foreword by John Wolfenden. See the review of the American edition, where support is readily given to the book's plea for tolerance, but balks at its "questionable propositions", the result of "desperate argumentation", "perhaps understandable in the light of Britain's savage persecution of the homosexual" (Galdston 1960).

17 Some commentators pointed to the forthcoming election as a reason for the Government's caution.

18 It was over a year before the Report was debated in Parliament and the pressure group The Homosexual Law Reform Society was formed to lobby Parliament and influence public opinion. A revised legal code for prostitution was enacted in the Street Offences Act (1959) and an overview is provided in Hall Williams (1960); however, the more controversial matter of homosexuality had to wait until legal reform in 1967. How the British cinema dealt with the issue of female sexuality and the figure of the prostitute in the period is treated in Bell-Williams (2006).

Jeffrey Weeks' conclusion that *Wolfenden* established a moral taxonomy for the next "permissive" stage of sexual law reform, while broadly pertinent, tends to mask the continued diversity of opinion and the undisputable fact that *Wolfenden* did not represent a "hegemonic" position regarding male homosexuality (1989: 244). For instance, the contributions to a special issue of the *British Journal of Delinquency* devoted to *Wolfenden* and the problem of homosexuality revealed the "mixture of approval and criticism" that met the *Report*,¹⁹ and attempts at gauging public opinion on the recommendations tended to reveal the "acute division" of feeling in society (Jepson 1959: 249).²⁰ It is evident that the public debate surrounding the *Wolfenden Report* remained strongly influenced by the traditions of moral regulation and a commitment to conventional norms. After all, it would be a decade before liberalising legislation was enacted, and then it would not be universal for Great Britain.²¹ It is also worth noting that *Wolfenden* did not reflect the most progressive thinking on male homosexuality and was openly criticised by some medical opinion. Psychotherapist Charles Berg pointed to the "endless incongruities" of the *Report* and found it "astonishing, in view of some of the material collected by the Wolfenden Committee, however superficial [...] that the conclusions and recommendations should be so inadequate and in most cases so unsympathetic, or even savage" (1959: 20–21).

Victim

When *Victim* was released I was seventeen and at school in Farnham in Surrey. It was there that I went, rather bravely, to see it. My first impression was an overwhelming sense of identification with the gay characters. The diversity of types portrayed was very liberating for me. The second point was that the film was, in my view, very well done with some superb acting which gave it so much more reality. The sad ending was no surprise given the culture of the time.

While it took me a number of years after that to sort myself out as a gay man I am certain that *Victim* had a very positive effect on me as a teenager. Incidentally I saw a re-run on television some two years ago and ended up crying for most of the last half hour! It is a wonderful reflection of life in 1961. (John Bennett, "The *Victim* Letters", in Bourne 1996: 239)

19 The summary comment appeared in the Editorial to the issue (1958, 9:1 (July), 3–6).

20 Jepson conducted an opinion poll among adult students in Yorkshire and cites a Gallup Poll from 1957.

21 A different legal code operated in Scotland, and the region was subsequently excluded from the liberal provisions of the 1967 Sexual Offences Act (Davidson and Davis 2004).

Under pressure from recent Continental film releases and the general discussion following *Wolfenden*, the film press in 1958 had speculated that:

The British Censor may shortly be asked to make an important decision – whether or not to approve the showing in Britain of films making honest drama of homosexuality, a subject which the British Board of Film Censors has always regarded as taboo [...] Whether the recent publication of the Wolfenden Committee’s report will influence the British Board of Film Censors remains to be seen. (Duperley and Donaldson: 1958)

There had been a partial relaxation of the stage-ban on homosexuality in the year of *Wolfenden*; however, John Trevelyan, the new liberal-minded Secretary of the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC), still maintained in 1959: “In our circles we can talk about homosexuality, but the general public is embarrassed by the subject, so until it becomes a subject that can be mentioned without offence it will be banned” (quoted in Aldgate 1995: 128). In the event, the Board had few problems with the “timid historical approaches” of the two Oscar Wilde films, but the proposed treatment of contemporary homosexuality in *Victim* created a much greater disturbance (Robertson 1989: 119).²² As was customary with a controversial subject, producer Michael Relph approached Trevelyan about a possible film treating the blackmailing of homosexuals. He received acceptance in principle and in May 1960 forwarded a synopsis and requested comments before proceeding with the production.²³

Separately, John Robertson and Tony Aldgate have carefully gone over the correspondence between producer and Censor and provide a full picture of the interchanges leading to the production and release of *Victim*. In May 1960, Audrey Field, the reader of the synopsis, found it a “sympathetic, perceptive, moral and responsible discussion of a problem”; but warned: “it is very oppressive [...] to be confronted with a world peopled with practically no one but ‘queers’ [...] Great tact and discretion will be needed if this project is to come off, and the ‘queerness’ must not be laid on with a trowel” (quoted in Robertson 1989: 120). In a letter to Relph, Trevelyan requested care with the production:

I do not say that the theme is impossible for an ‘X’ certificate film but I do think that great tact and discretion would be needed if the film is to be acceptable

22 The two Wilde films were released in May 1960 and that same month the Board received a draft screenplay for *A Taste of Honey*, which contained a sub-plot featuring a homosexual character, and the synopsis for *Victim*. Each of these films was eventually released with an adults only ‘X’ certificate (Aldgate 1995: 129).

23 In his study *The Homosexual Society*, Richard Hauser argues that interest in the problem of homosexuality had evaporated following the inconclusive debate around the *Wolfenden Report*, and it might be that one purpose of *Victim* was to bring the issue into the spotlight once again (1962: 17).

not only to us but also to the general public. As you know, public reaction on this subject tends to be strong. For the most part, intelligent people approach it with great sympathy and compassion, but to the great majority of cinema-goers homosexuality is outside their direct experience and is something which is shocking, distasteful and disgusting. This argues that public education is desirable and indeed it may be, but it also suggests that a film-maker should approach the subject with caution. (Quoted in Aldgate 1995: 134)

At the end of June a completed script was sent to the BBFC and once again received the attention of Audrey Field. "We have never had such an explicit survey of this subject on the screen, or such a great number of different types of 'Queer' assembled in one film" she reported. Admitting: "I am rather nervous of this script": "Relph and Dearden are not sensational film-makers, but a lot of the material here is in itself pretty sensational; and the public may be getting a bit tired of exaggerated plain speaking on this subject" (quoted in Robertson 1989: 121). In particular, the examiner was anxious about the portrayal of blackmailing and its related violence. John Trevelyan was moved to write a long letter to the scriptwriter Janet Green,²⁴ a document, according to Robertson, revealing of his "liberal approach" and the "manner in which he viewed the BBFC's function within Britain's traditional parliamentary democratic structure" (1989: 121). Trevelyan warned that the filmmaker "dealing with this subject is treading on dangerous ground and will have to proceed with caution" (quoted in Robertson 1989: 122). He then restated and expanded on the points raised by Audrey Field, requesting that a greater degree of normality be introduced into the drama, that the violence associated with blackmail be reduced and that all teenage characters be removed from the story. A detailed list of objections was itemized and included anti-homosexual dialogue, a homosexual's account of his time in prison, a teenage club setting, and various scenes of violence and threat. A revised script, taking account of the objections raised, reached the BBFC in August 1960, and largely satisfied Trevelyan. However, he issued a final plea of caution to the producers:

The only thing we are rather unhappy about now is that we get the impression that the balance between the contrasting attitudes to homosexuality does not represent that of present day public opinion and that it seems to us to come down rather heavily in favour of the homosexuals [...] I think you should be careful also not to give ideas to potential blackmailers. (Quoted in Robertson 1989: 124)

The completed film was presented to the BBFC in May 1961 and further negotiation was required between producers and Censor. Dearden and Relph put up a strong fight against proposed cuts and only consented to

24 The script was written by Green and her husband John McCormick.

losing the statement “there’s a moment of choice for almost every adolescent boy”, which the Board thought “too sweeping and not a good idea to put into the minds of adolescents in the audience” (quoted in Robertson 1989: 125). *Victim* was finally awarded its expected ‘X’ certificate on 1 June 1961 and released for exhibition in September of that year.²⁵

Victim relates the tragic drama of a young man’s love – from afar – for an eminent barrister who is on the verge of being raised to Queen’s Counsel. Boy Barrett is being blackmailed and pays to keep his infatuation for Melville Farr from being made public. Stealing from the building firm where he works, Barrett is cornered by the police and takes his life in a police cell hoping to shield Farr, but leaves behind evidence that links him to the barrister. Farr had believed that the last desperate phone calls from Barrett had been for the purpose of blackmail and he had curtly dismissed him, and it is with great pain that he learns that Boy died to protect him. He vows to run the blackmailers down; regardless of the damage it would cause his career and reputation. With the help of Eddy, Boy’s friend, Farr moves among the circle of homosexuals centred on The Chequers public house, attentive for signs of anxiety that might lead him to the blackmailer. As he gets closer, he is surprised to learn that some of his acquaintances in business and the arts are paying to preserve their reputations and freedom, and Farr refuses to pay-off the blackmailers once and for all on their behalf. Meanwhile, the truth has begun to dawn on his wife, who demands an explanation and clarification of her husband’s relationship with Boy. In the film’s most famous and powerful scene, Farr, in an emotional outburst, admits that he stopped seeing Boy – he had been giving him regular lifts in his car – because he “wanted him”.²⁶ In collusion with the police, Farr sets a trap for the blackmailers, and the forces of the law move into an arrest when the culprits take what they think is a final pay-off. Afterwards, Farr is left to face the publicity and the inevitable damage to his prosperous career. He finds his wife waiting for him at their home, and they decide to face the onslaught together.²⁷

Unsurprisingly, censorship was a determining influence on the structure of the film. This of course was recognised by the filmmakers who expected to enter into negotiation with the BBFC; a factor specifically alluded to in an article Michael Relph contributed to the journal *Films and Filming* at the time of the film’s release. Here, unquestionably in light of his recent experiences

25 Trevelyan pursued an identical policy of toning down sensationalism and promoting a responsible approach to homosexuality with Tony Richardson’s *A Taste of Honey* (1961) (Aldgate 1995: 136–139).

26 This is the moment of “shattering intensity” for Medhurst when the unintentional radicalism of the text bursts through and is of particular import for a gay audience (1996: 131).

27 The character of Farr is of course a textbook representation of the ‘respectable homosexual’ valorised by Wildeblood and *Wolfenden*, and sardonically referred to by a later critic as “a gay hero with credentials enough to get into heaven, let alone society” (Russo 1987: 130).

with *Victim*, the producer examined the prospect of 'freedom' in the commercial cinema, claiming it as an ideal, adding: "Loose a term as it may be, freedom is something fiercely desired by every cinema enthusiast whether he be filmgoer or filmmaker" (1961: 24). Relph proceeded to outline the various "curbs on creative freedom" in the film industry, starting with the financiers whose tendency was to play safe and emulate past successes and could insist on a bankable star regardless of the performer's suitability for the part. Then, in turn, the star "will want to pass judgement on the project from his own and not necessarily the author's point of view" (1961: 24). A production will also depend on the goodwill of private, public and commercial bodies, local government and the police; for example, where location shooting is to take place: "Each, according to his indispensability to the producer", reported Relph, "can dictate to him about the content of his film" (1961: 24). Next follows the confrontation with the Censor and its arbitration on what it deems to be in the 'public interest', a potentially lengthy process as we have seen with *Victim*. Finally, there is the matter of exhibition:

If the distributor who financed the film does not happen also to own a circuit of cinemas, he must now sell it to a circuit-owning exhibitor. In Britain, this means to one of two men. Now, if both these men and the interests they represent doubt the film's entertainment value or dislike its subject matter its almost total failure is assured. It may even (as in the case of *The Mark*) be denied a release at all. (1961: 24)²⁸

However, there was one final hurdle for the committed filmmaker. As Relph pointed out:

If he has successfully pursued his artistic goal without compromise, he is likely to receive the praise of the cultured minority represented by the best critics, but if his film is not one that is also appreciated and understood by a mass audience, his picture will fail commercially; he will find it difficult to get a chance to make other films, and it may be that the commercial cinema is not his place. (1961: 24)

In view of the considerable constraints outlined, Relph rhetorically asked the question: "What, however, of the producer with serious artistic intentions who believes in film as a medium and wants to use it in new and adventurous ways? To extend techniques and to say something positive about the world we live in" (1961: 24). An answer, allowing for the shift from convention to conviction in filmmaking, could be found in groups of producers using their collective muscle to handle their own distribution. Dearden and Relph had recently become involved in two such initiatives, Bryanston and Allied

28 *The Mark* (1961) dealt with the sensitive subject of child molestation.

Film Makers (AFM). As he reported, "Through these groups we are able to finance the first 70 per cent of our own films without the approval of our parent distributors who will have to sell the films for us" (1961: 24, 37).²⁹ Relph considered this a "great gesture of faith from the old-style distributor to the new-type producer" and the arrangement had gotten off to an excellent start with the resounding box-office successes of *The League of Gentlemen* (d. Dearden, 1960, AFM) and *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (d. Reisz, 1960, Bryanston). Relph believed that the breakthrough for the producer-distributor arrangements stemmed from the success of his earlier social problem film *Sapphire*, which tempted the ultra-conservative Rank Organisation to support more challenging productions such as *No Love for Johnnie* (d. Thomas, 1961), *Flame in the Streets* (Baker, 1961) and eventually *Victim*.³⁰ The latter film, according to Relph, was "the most controversial subject ever backed by the Rank Organisation" (1961: 24). Relph then proceeded to outline the production of *Victim*, in view of the various potential constraints he had introduced. The scriptwriters had been commissioned to write the film "on a flagrantly controversial theme"³¹:

The British Government had refused to implement the Wolfenden Committee's recommendation to legalise homosexuality between consenting adults in private because of adverse public opinion. The film dares to advocate precisely this. It casts Britain's (and the Rank Organisation's) leading Romantic star, Dirk Bogarde, as a homosexual. Could a producer choose a more dangerous theme on which to set up a picture?

To start with, Earl St. John, Davis' enlightened Production Executive, helped us finance the script. Allied Film Makers, as it is able to do, granted us 70 per cent of the finance without consultation with the Rank Organisation.

In view of the subject, however, we felt compelled to ask John Davis to read the script and it would have been possible for him in his capacity of Exhibitor to deny the film a showing. Not only did Davis endorse our distribution guarantee but he offered to put up the end money.³²

29 Dearden and Relph produced *The League of Gentlemen* (1960), *Man in the Moon* (1960), *Victim* and *Life for Ruth* (1962) for AFM (films released through the Rank Organisation), and *A Place to Go* (1963) for Bryanston (film released through British Lion).

30 Relph paints an uncharacteristically favourable picture of Rank executive John Davis, a "staunch champion" of *Violent Playground* and *Sapphire*, but elsewhere an almost universally disliked figure who brought an accountant's sensibility to the business of picture-making. However, see the relatively sympathetic portrait of Davis in Macnab (1994: 218–219).

31 The scriptwriters could draw on substantial sociological and cultural evidence that came in the wake of *Wolfenden*, for example Westwood (1960).

32 The "end money" was the final 30% of the budget, the last to be repaid from the returns and therefore the most risky investment.

Courage is in the air of the Cinema just now. Courage not only of producers, directors and stars like Dirk Bogarde, but of financiers like John Davis and of the public as well.

Now is the time for every creative film-maker to throw his weight behind the commercial cinema and see if we can make the artists' point of view prevail both with the public and the financiers. Their points of view are, after all, synonymous. (1961: 24)

Michael Relph provided a revealing overview of the potentially tortuous path to production for a contentious film subject and a revelation of the challenge of bringing a progressive outlook to the British cinema screen. An examination of the production and reception of *Victim* also reveals much about the process of negotiation in commercial filmmaking, confirms the boldness and daring of Dearden, Relph and others in preparing this film, and the limits to what could be portrayed in a British film dealing with homosexuality in 1961. Actor Dirk Bogarde later recalled that accepting the part of Melville Farr “was the wisest decision I ever made in my cinematic life”; however, as is widely appreciated, it was a brave move for a film star with a strong female following.³³ As Bogarde added: “It is extraordinary, in this over-permissive age, to believe that this modest film could ever have been considered courageous, daring or dangerous to make. It was, in its time, all three” (1979: 241).³⁴ Casting was seemingly a problem. Bogarde reports that “very few of the actors approached to play in it accepted; most flatly refused, and every actress asked to play the wife turned it down without even reading the script, except for Sylvia Syms who accepted readily and with warm comprehension” (1979: 241).³⁵ Initially, the role of the crusading barrister was offered to Jack Hawkins, who had featured in Dearden and Relph’s *The League of Gentlemen*, but he was hesitant, and James Mason and Stewart Granger (who had just appeared for the team in *The Silent Partner*, 1961) were considered. Bogarde’s biographer, drawing on the papers of Janet Green, reports that Rank production executive Earl St. John suggested contract star Bogarde for the role (Coldstream 2005: 343–44). However, Relph consistently maintained that their first choice was always Bogarde, believing him “perfect for *Victim*”:

It was very courageous of him to play the gay barrister. Until then his career had been built on being an attractive heterosexual matinee idol. From the start

33 The director Ralph Thomas, for example, was convinced the role would ruin Bogarde’s career, and the film critic Alexander Walker noted in his diary that the detractors were in “bad odour” with the actor (Coldstream 2005: 348).

34 At the time he was making the film, Bogarde told the press: “You can’t leave all the adult, intelligent films to the French, Italians and Swedes” (*Daily Mail*, 19 August 1961).

35 In a considerable irony, Syms was five months pregnant at the time. See her comments on the role in Bourne (1996: 159).

he was very sympathetic to the subject, and helpful with the script. However, we expected Dirk to turn us down, so we had Michael Redgrave as our second choice because we knew about his homosexuality, and felt he would be sympathetic to the subject. (Quoted in Bourne 1996: 158–59)³⁶

Bogarde later claimed that exceptional precautions were taken with regard to filming: “The set was closed to all visitors, the Press firmly forbidden, and the whole project was treated, at the beginning, with all the false reverence, dignity and respect usually accorded to the Crucifixion or Queen Victoria” (1979: 241).³⁷ The director’s *Final Shooting Script*, dated 23 January 1961, contains numerous last-minute ‘pink’ replacement sheets, and further records many on-set adjustments to dramatic business and revisions to dialogue, part-indicating, perhaps, due care in the telling of the story.³⁸

Unsurprisingly, rumours of a British film daring to tackle the controversial theme of homosexuality reached the press, despite the desire for secrecy during the production that Bogarde alluded to. Leonard Mosley, writing for the *Daily Express*, confirmed the surprise in a report posted in the summer of 1961, where he declared he found it “hard to believe”: “Would Lord Rank really *dare?*”; “Would a star of Dirk Bogarde’s calibre risk his reputation with his fans by playing such a role?” (28 July). And the rumours led to wild speculation among some incredulous reporters, which the producers felt impelled to challenge. In one report it was claimed that:

The Rank Organisation is to make a film about homosexuality starring Dirk Bogarde. But my information is that the subject will make its central character, a middle-aged barrister, only a potential homosexual. The reason: The studios are afraid that their top contract star for fifteen years would lose his female following if he played an honest queer.

It concluded with the judgement that:

If *Victim* at least points to the plight of millions who, because of Parliament’s refusal to amend the law, are open to blackmail because their promiscuity is homosexual rather than adulterous it may do some good. But if it implies, as is the case of some cheap literature, that homosexuals exist only among a low-life criminal group, then it will add little to public enlightenment. (Warren 1961: 31)

36 Bogarde had a profitable working relationship with Dearden and Relph. His career had received an important boost with his appearance as the young delinquent in *The Blue Lamp* (1950), and he had featured with less success in their *The Gentle Gunman* (1952). He would finally work with the filmmakers on *The Mind Benders* (1962). In 1960, Dearden had bought Beel House from Bogarde as his home (*The Times*, 10 January 1966).

37 Bogarde’s biographer warns that his subject was, over the years, inconsistent in reporting his experience on the film (Coldstream 2005: 346–47).

38 Even at this late stage the central character is scripted as ‘Carr’ and Dearden has crossed these out and replaced with ‘Farr’. I would like to thank James Dearden for making available to me his father’s shooting script.

Both producer and star responded to the “inaccuracy” of the report with letters to the journal, and the exchange revealed much about the expectations for a film production on the topic of homosexuality, as well as the filmmakers’ concern to establish their independence of operation and serious approach to the theme (*Films and Filming*, May 1961). Bogarde expressed his distress at reading:

Such inaccurate reporting especially for once when one is trying to get out of the Simon Sparrow category (however excellent and delightful he was to play) and join forces with a team who are honestly trying to develop with a new and exciting trend in the Cinema today.³⁹

Both correspondents pointed out that *Victim* was being produced by Dearden and Relph for AFM, independently of the Rank Organisation, and that neither Rank nor Bogarde made any “alterations of substance” to the script. Relph confirmed that “The film puts forward the same point of view as the Wolfenden Committee, that the law should be changed”, and confronted a misimpression given in the report, stating: “Contrary to suggesting homosexuals ‘exist only among a low-life criminal group,’ the film shows that homosexuality may be found in otherwise completely responsible citizens in every strata of society”.

The film was released to respectful reviews and some excellent notices, and Medhurst’s summary of the critical consensus “as regarding *Victim* as a well-intentioned piece of special-pleading, successful in making its social point, but in the process of doing so becoming schematised and propagandist and therefore aesthetically unsatisfactory”, underplays the respect many reviewers had for the daring of the producers and the pleasures of a good thriller (Medhurst 1996: 124). *Films and Filming* chose *Victim* as its “Film of the Month” for September 1961, promoting it under the tagline of “A plea for a minority ...” and informing its readers:

Under British law an unknown number of homosexuals live in fear of blackmail. Several years ago the Wolfenden Committee recommended a change in the law; but nothing has been done. Now producer Michael Relph and director Basil Dearden have made a film about the ‘crime’ of being different.⁴⁰

39 Simon Sparrow was the character Bogarde played in the popular series of *Doctor* comedies directed by Ralph Thomas and produced by Betty Box (1954–57).

40 *Films and Filming* claimed the “World’s largest sale amongst critical filmgoers” (May 1961: 3) and enjoyed a large gay readership for which it provided numerous “beefcake” photos of attractive male stars (Bourne 1996: 247). There is a contemporary discussion of blackmail and homosexuality in Westwood (1960: 147–49); while the situation of sexual blackmail was dealt with in novels such as Robin Maugham’s *The Servant* (1948) and Compton Mackenzie’s *Thin Ice* (1956), and in plays such as Terence Rattigan’s *Table Number Seven* (1954), Joe Orton’s *Inadmissible Evidence* (1964) and Noël Coward’s *A Song at Twilight* (1966).

Predictably, reviews centred on Bogarde's performance and his bravery in taking on the role. For Ernest Betts it was "Bogarde at his best!" (*The People*, 3 September 1961); while Leonard Mosley, writing in the *Daily Express*, felt it was a case of the star winning the "'forbidden theme' gamble", and "the biggest slap in the eye Dirk Bogarde has dealt his more emotional female fans since the day he objected to a girl's school next door to his house in Buckinghamshire" (30 August 1961). Thomas Wiseman acknowledged *Victim* as "A big risk for Bogarde – but he brings it off"; adding that "[i]n accepting this part, Mr Bogarde took a brave, calculated risk. What he may lose in terms of teenage adulation, he is sure to gain in adult respect for a performance that is intelligent and accomplished". Wiseman also felt that "one must admire the sheer acrobatic skill displayed by the producer, Michael Relph, and the director, Basil Dearden, in walking the tightrope between holier-than-thou hypocrisy and dirtier-than-them offensiveness" (*Daily Telegraph*, 1 September 1961). Reviewers were divided over the choice of the scriptwriters and producers to present the theme in terms of genre cinema.⁴¹ The veteran Dilys Powell argued,

It is a thriller (and a good one) with characters which could not have been shown and on a subject which would have excited horror or ribaldry a few years ago. To treat the theme as a thriller may not be particularly bold, but to treat it at all was brave. (*The Sunday Times*, 3 September 1961)

While, in contrast, Nina Hibbin, writing in the *Daily Worker*, felt that on the level of a mystery, *Victim* was "pretty run-of-the-mill stuff?". Recognising that any film "that takes a firm attitude on such a controversial issue could never have been made commercially without being pegged to a more conventionally sensational theme [...] Blackmail, in this context", she found the compromise "an uneasy one which puts the matter out of focus". However, *Victim* offered a "sobering picture of the way homosexual inclinations make a

41 Victor Perkins, in a notorious polemic against British cinema (and a specific critical demolition of Dearden) published in the year after *Victim's* release, directed some of his venom at the social problem pictures wrapped-up as thrillers: "These pictures are particularly offensive in assuming that their holy platitudes are too loftily intellectual to be accepted by audiences unless the pill of wisdom is sweetened with spurious excitement. Thus in *Sapphire* and *Victim*, Basil Dearden and his scriptwriter Janet Green have produced thriller-problem films which work neither as thrillers nor as examinations of a problem, and particularly not as films" (Perkins: 1972: 9, first pub. 1962). Michael Relph later defended the approach in the following terms: "We decided to contain them in a thriller structure, for which we were attacked quite a lot because it was felt we belittled the subjects we dealt with. But as far as reaching a wide audience was concerned, I think it was really necessary to use the thriller form. When you make a political film, you don't want to preach to the converted. We were always trying to reach a wider public, which was a very ambitious thing to do at that time" (quoted in Bourne 1996: 158).

permanent nightmare of private lives" (2 September 1961).⁴² The reviewer in the *Guardian* praised *Victim* as a "good thriller" and, moreover, an "exceptionally good and rather brave sermon":

The sermon is about the plight of homosexuals in our society – that is, about a large minority of male human beings whom, in spite of the *Wolfenden Report*, the law continues to treat as criminals and who are, accordingly, particularly liable to blackmail. A humane police officer, in the course of the film, observes that our present laws about the punishment of homosexuality are "the blackmailer's charter." It is well said and the film proceeds very cogently to amplify and demonstrate the truth of the remark. Indeed, it is hard to imagine that in the present (alleged) state of public opinion on the subject, any feature film could have preached the salutary sermon more shrewdly and sensibly. (2 September 1961)

Where there was disapproval of the film, it tended to be of the 'failed to live up to the courage of its convictions' type of criticism. For Derek Hill,

It obviously took some kind of courage to approach such a theme, but the argument against a cruel and unnecessary persecution is hardly advanced by Janet Green and John McCormick's script, which is more concerned with hoodwinking audiences about the identity of the principal blackmailer than with any serious inquiry into the issues it professes to consider. (*Financial Times*, 1 September 1961)

William Whitebait, warming to the dynamic thriller opening in *Victim*, contentedly wrote "So far, so confident. The impetuous thriller lead-in has been given a new edge. The screw has been turned". But anxiously acknowledged that: "Now the film must tackle the problem it has hinted at. How far can this be done?" He was disappointed:

Victim has a go; dabs in a cross-section of the homosexual's world; states the case for toleration; pursues one drama of wrecked marriage and career; and for good measure winds up with a whodunit over the blackmailer's identity [...] Realism is whittled away. Inverts must be whitewashed, or else the prejudice of audiences might tell against them. All the villainy descends on the queer's parasite the blackmailer, and to keep things lively the blackmailer's are turned into grotesques [...] Then the humanitarian case must be sustained, so the police develops a wise paternalism. And when it comes to marriage on the rocks, the best the script can do is to beat a hasty retreat into the terms of Galsworthian theatre. (*New Statesman*, 8 September 1961)

42 Much writing on the film has decried the cheapening of the serious theme of homosexuality through the recourse to a popular thriller plot involving blackmail. More recently, in fact, McLaren has revealed the crucial place of blackmail to eventual reform: "It was the importance of blackmail stories, as propounded in newspaper and court reports, in novels, plays, films, and academic treatises, that played a key role in the 1950s and 1960s in convincing both the English public and their politicians of the need for homosexual law reform" (2002: 238).

Peter Baker noted that *Victim* was “a film which took courage to write, courage to act, courage to direct and produce and – in fairness to the often criticised Rank Organisation – courage to distribute to British cinemas”; but while finding it a “notable piece of propaganda” he thought it a “not very good film”:

The arguments themselves are logical enough; but much as I sympathise with the producer’s intentions there are far too many occasions when the audience is expected to get the message. It is easy to understand the urge to hit hard, so that even the Primrose League lady in the back row of the stalls can be in no doubt about the opinions being expressed; but it takes more than clear exposition of an argument to persuade people to accept it. Propaganda drama needs more than logic on its side, it needs emotional involvement. And this is what *Victim* lacks. (*Films and Filming*, September 1961)

The final summary comment should be left for Terence Kelley, writing in *Sight and Sound*, who asked, “Could *Victim* have been more frank than it is?”, and soberly answered, “It is only fair to say that it could not (in the Britain of 1961)” (quoted in Walker 1986: 156–57).

The American censors proved more unforgiving than their British counterparts. *Victim* was denied a Production Code Seal of Approval, which meant that its distribution was restricted squarely to the fringes of exhibition in art house cinemas and its commercial potential was clearly harmed. The film contravened the Code specifically in several dialogue uses of the terms ‘homosexual’ and ‘homosexuality’. The trade paper *Variety* reported the advice of the distributor which suggested that “where local censorship bruises easily, exhibs should screen film before buying it” (20 December 1961). The intolerance that met the film in America was reflected in the review published in *Time* magazine. Headed “A Plea for Perversion?”, the reviewer acknowledged a “neat plot”, “deft direction by Basil Dearden” and “the sort of grim good manners one expects of the British in these trying situations”. Expecting a carefully crafted attack on extortion, the reviewer was dismayed to encounter a “sensational exploitation of homosexuality [...] and what’s more offensive, an implicit approval of homosexuality as a practice”:

Everyone in the picture who disapproves of homosexuals proves to be an ass, a dolt or a sadist. Nowhere does the film suggest that homosexuality is a serious (but often curable) neurosis that attacks the biological basis of life itself. “I can’t help the way I am.” says one of the sodomites in this movie. “Nature played me a dirty trick.” And the scriptwriters whose psychiatric information is clearly coeval with the statute they dispute, accept this sick-silly self-delusion as a medical fact. (23 February 1962)⁴³

43 See also the similar treatment dished out in *Films in Review* (February 1962). The British Censor, writing in his memoirs, reported that in October 1961, following the encounter with

Subsequent critical handling of *Victim* in the decade after its appearance and before the militant gay movement had established any real presence in British society, tended to show an awareness of the restrictions under which the film had surfaced and therefore make allowances for its handling of a contentious issue. For example, Raymond Durnat, writing one year before legal reform, thought the script “something of a tour de force”, deploying “the detective story formula to lure us onto a Cook’s Tour of London’s homosexual milieu, types and problems”:

The types, having problems, often become characters, and the film very efficiently counters most of the popular misconceptions about homosexuality. ‘Queers are only upper class’ – one is a builder’s labourer; ‘queers are effeminate’ – one is a muscle-man;⁴⁴ ‘you can tell queers at a glance’ – the queerest-looking queer is a normal ‘tec, posing; ‘queers are sapping the nation’s moral fibre’ – the ‘establishment’ queer in his Rolls-Royce really cares about the welfare of his employees; ‘a married man can’t be a queer’ – the hero (Dirk Bogarde) happily settled with his sweetly conventional wife (Sylvia Syms), is revealed as having, in his heart at least, an Achilles’ heel that they both, tragically, have to live with, and which he must, stoically, refuse to indulge, even if it means he’ll never know a truly passionate sexual joy. (1966: 32)

Such a broad schematic presentation of gay presence across British society, a matter that concerned the censors lest it overburden the film at the cost of ‘normal’ society, could clearly perform an important educative role for audiences steeped in narrow and rigid stereotypes.⁴⁵ Durnat praised the film’s “lack of sentimentality (queers are prominent among those who persecute queers)”, but felt that Dearden and Relph had “pulled their punches” in their treatment of the police and what were widely seen at the time as unacceptable policing methods in the use of *agents provocateurs* and a greater

Victim, the Production Code was modified. The new provision read: “It is permissible under the Code [...] to consider approving references in motion pictures to the subject of sex aberrations, provided any references are treated with care, discretion and restraint, and in all other respects conform to the Code. The ruling in no way opens up the Code to irresponsible or immoral or indecent themes or treatment” (Trevelyan 1973: 183).

44 This can only be assumed for the character of Sandy Youth, one of the blackmailers, who adorns his apartment with a print of Michelangelo’s David and affects a pronounced sense of style. This character conforms with a ‘type’ detailed in one contemporary study: “The semi-criminal situation of any active homosexual or bisexual with homosexual tendencies offers many opportunities for blackmail, since concern for the feelings of families, parents, etc. is a more potent factor than fear of prison. It is the ideal hunting ground for those who want to see their victim suffer and ‘pay up’” (Hauser 1962: 69).

45 In 1959, the psychologist Charles Berg argued, “were it possible for the punishers to mix freely in the lives of the alleged culprits, and really get to know them, their outlook, and even their way of life and delinquent behaviour, the compulsion to punish might increasingly give way to understanding and therapy, at least in a large number of cases” (Berg 1959: 31).

willingness to prosecute homosexuals rather than their blackmailers.⁴⁶ However, he was unrealistic, considering the ‘restraints’ on commercial film production outlined by Relph, in his belief that the filmmakers should have had the “moral courage to denounce police policies as intolerant and savage” (1966: 32). Roger Manvell, in his survey of British cinema since the war published in 1969, still found *Victim* a “remarkably sensitive film”, “explicit in its handling of the problem of the homosexual” and as was now widely acknowledged “its release marked once again a step forward in a progressive censorship policy” (Manvell 1969: 82).

The belated legal reform regarding male homosexuality in 1967 was bound, eventually, to impact on the representation of homosexuality in the arts, as well as the retrospective view towards *Victim*, which had been overtaken by events and embodied the sensibilities of an earlier time. Late in 1967, one hopeful correspondent to *Films and Filming* felt that “Maybe at last homosexuality is going to be given genuine adult treatment in the cinema” and that producers will move beyond “the *Victim* era, in which the good guy had been a homo once, was sorry about it, and hoped he never would be again” (November 1967: 38). The hardening of the attitude towards *Victim* is evident in the writing of Alexander Walker. In his original review for the *Evening Standard*, he had praised the courage of Bogarde and “his brave, sensitive picture of an unhappy, terribly bewildered man”, something that will “win him and this film a far wider audience”. Walker believed that the script “tackles grippingly that parasite of perversion – the blackmailer”, and applauded *Victim* as a “good film. Good as a fast-paced thriller. Overwhelmingly good as an acting triumph for Bogarde” (31 August 1961). He was less fulsome a decade later when he came to write his history of British cinema in the 1960s. He now found *Victim* “prudent” but not “artistic”, and related a “more serious objection”, “that the barrister, played by Dirk Bogarde, although by inclination a deviant, is never allowed to get as far as the act. Thus the film sidesteps the less comfortable qualifications of its resolutely middle-class sympathies” (1986: 157, first pub. 1974). In 1976, when he was writing for a specifically gay readership and *Victim* had become distinctly unfashionable, Walker made a complete about turn:

46 Consider this evidence collected by Westwood: “Some people are so incensed by the idea of homosexuality that police methods that wouldn’t be tolerated for a moment in other crimes are allowed when they are after queers. A lawyer friend of mine laughed at the way the Wolfenden Committee had been misled about police methods. He said, “Good God, surely they don’t believe that!” The worst thing is this threat of exposure or violence which the police use to persuade people to tell tales about others. I don’t think there’s much more than mild physical violence, but they’re not above threatening more if they think it will persuade a person to plead guilty” (1960: 138–39). In contrast to the impeccable moral crusading of Farr in *Victim*, Westwood found evidence that some legal professionals were far from scrupulous in their service to homosexuals facing charges (1960: 142).

I never thought *Victim* stood up very well at the time, let alone now [...] It presented homosexuals as very limp-wristed, arty-crafty people [...] There was a sense of manipulation about it which showed in its desire to please everybody and offend no one. (*Gay News*, n. 101, 1976, quoted in Bourne 1996: 161)

The critical tone regarding *Victim* was cemented, as we have seen, by the writings of Dyer and Medhurst in the late 1970s and 1980s, and this was reinforced by the unsympathetic treatment of the social problem film in general in the hands of John Hill.⁴⁷ In the middle-1990s, new writing on Dearden and Relph, and on gay figures and representations in British cinema, began to portray *Victim* and other social problem films in a more favourable light. In 1997, Raymond Durnat, the first British critic to have given Dearden and Relph any developed attention, was invited to revisit the social problem films of the partnership, and elected to reappraise *Sapphire* and *Victim*.⁴⁸ In response to the established critiques of the filmmakers, Durnat proposed to read the two films,

not as deplorable failures to assert subsequent orthodoxies, but rather as an attempt to distinguish attitudes which subsequent orthodoxies may conflate or misread; to defend as reasonable (even if dubious) some conservative anxieties; and to appreciate Dearden and Relph's balance between honest witness to the zeitgeist, and critical intervention against it. (1997: 63)

Durnat finds the films richer than his immediate predecessors, with the productions managing to “tightly integrate their principal *social problem* with rich *sociological* detail”; and with “liberal messages” intimated “not by pious ideas (the racist is a villain, and so on), but through brief, idiomatic dialogue with deftly inserted data (for example, 90% of blackmail cases involved homosexuality)” (1997: 63).⁴⁹ In contrast with previously unsympathetic readings that had tended to find a simplistically uniform liberal sensibility to the films, Durnat argues for a more complex organisation of the texts, where, through sophisticated narrational and structuring devices, “social community” is “made strange”, leading to a “loosening” of audience

47 Feinstein, while criticising Dearden's direction and the ‘simplicity’ of the treatment, concedes that “its formal excess and thematic topicality provide a density and richness rare in the cinema” (1985: 654). Russo's treatment of *Victim* in the 1980s was more generous, welcoming the portrayal of a gay hero who has to fight not only the entrenched prejudice of heterosexual society, but also the “paralyzing self-hatred” of the other homosexual characters in the film (1987: 131).

48 When Medhurst revisited *Victim* on the occasion of the anthologisation of his landmark article, he also was more generous towards the film, now considering it a film “which still has something meaningful to say [...] about queer history, about Englishness and about homophobia” (1996: 131).

49 This oft-cited figure seems to have originated with Lord Jowett and delivered in his Maudsley Lecture to the Royal Medico-Psychological Association (Westwood 1960: 147).

expectations; no unitary “ideology”, “but a wide range of spectator attitudes” (1997: 64–65). His reading is historically sensitive to the highly-developed presence of “witch-hunt” motifs in the film.⁵⁰ Durnat also singles out the unsettling “transverse” detection within domestic intimacy, wherein Farr’s wife “prises the truth out of him” (1997: 64); for Durnat, Laura’s “inquisition” into her gay husband probes issues of sincerity, fidelity and communication as incisively as Ingmar Bergman’s marriage films” (1997: 66).

In his study of gays and lesbians in British cinema, Stephen Bourne has also been positive about the impact and achievements of *Victim*, believing that “when *Victim* was released in this country in 1961 it had an enormous impact on the lives of gay men who, for the first time, saw credible representations of themselves and their situations in a commercial British film” (Bourne 1996: 155). He arrives at this viewpoint following the remarkable insights revealed by the “*Victim* letters”.⁵¹ Dyer’s theoretical probing of *Victim* had only led him to wonder what audience responses to the film might have been; and Medhurst’s more contextually sensitive account is greatly expanded and enhanced by the revelations contained in the correspondence. In fact, a letter to *Films and Filming* just after the film’s release furnished a lone piece of viewer response. Dudley Bennett of Scotland, while appreciating “its unprecedented boldness”, found *Victim* “curiously flat and unconvincing” – possibly a case of a letdown after understandably high expectations. However, he acknowledged the difficulties facing the producers in bringing the subject to the screen and “that in making *Victim* they were perhaps mainly concerned in paving the way for better things. If this is so, *Victim* has achieved its purpose” (April 1962).⁵² It is uniformly the view across the “*Victim* letters” that “The film had a huge effect, for the good, on the thinking of those who saw it” (St John Adlard, in Bourne 1996: 238). As one correspondent recalls, “A female colleague at work did remark (having seen *Victim*) that she thought ‘men like that’ shouldn’t be imprisoned” (Christopher Coates, in Bourne 1996: 241). Kenneth Keenan went to see the film unaware of its content, and simply because he “was in love with Dirk Bogarde!”:

50 Something widely felt in gay society: “A depression, a Chief Constable who wants to be a hero, a sex-scandal of the more unsavoury sort – any of these things can start a manhunt again. No homosexual will feel safe until the law is changed” (quoted in Hauser 1962: 98). The sensitivity was tied into concerns over the McCarthyite witch hunts in the States and American concerns regarding the reliability of its British allies following the homosexual revelations of the spy Guy Burgess (McLaren 2002: 222).

51 Personal and moving accounts by gay men who saw *Victim* in 1961, and published in Bourne (1996: 238–54).

52 Bennett reports that Dearden and Relph had acquired the rights to Simon Raven’s *Feathers of Death*, “one of the best novels with a homosexual theme”, as a possible follow up to *Victim*. The film was never made.

Homosexuals (known to me) found the film sympathetic, helpful and, above all, totally realistic. My view too! At the time of its release I was not able to discuss it in public at all. Only in private, in a friend's house in Wigan. Six of us discussed it. We all lived near each other, but were entirely in the 'closet'. (Quoted in Bourne 1996: 245)

Bogarde was clearly an icon for the gay audience and "just so right as someone that a person could worship from afar, as Barrett was supposed to have done. The character finally came out and he was brave, dashing and very decorative. It was good to have a hero" (Tony Newton, in Bourne 1996: 248). For some young men, facing the cashier to buy a ticket for *Victim* was a significant act of identity politics, their "first 'coming out' statement" (P.M. Scott, in Bourne 1996: 351); and for one "callow twenty-two year old" at least, "it really was a watershed in my awareness of gay life" (George Toland, in Bourne 1996: 254).

In many respects, *Victim* became an easy and obvious target for critics wishing to find scapegoats for the failure of British society and culture to deal adequately with the issue of male homosexuality. Such viewpoints fail to take into proper account the considerable restraints under which commercial film production operated and the tolerance of public opinion for behaviour which had for so long been considered unacceptable. The comparatively enlightened opinion of reviewers that met the film recognised the bravery of the filmmakers in tackling the controversial issue; and the testimony of gay men who sought out the film eager to encounter and experience even compromised representations of their kind, confirms the positive impact *Victim* had on contemporary audiences. As Michael Rutt informs us,

Of all the films of the early 1960s which dealt with gay topics, perhaps *Victim* was the most heralded and awaited, with great expectations, by the gay community [...] The impact of seeing the film in Leicester Square on its initial West End release was an experience which stays in the memory.

He was convinced that *Victim* "did much to bring about the 1967 Act" and more tolerant attitudes to homosexuality (quoted in Bourne 1996: 250–51). Such a view was held in higher political circles. Lord Arran had introduced the legislation into Parliament that eventually was passed into the Sexual Offences Act 1967. He wrote to Dirk Bogarde in 1968 after he had seen *Victim* on TV and stressed that he wanted "to say how much I admire your courage in undertaking this difficult and potentially damaging part". John Coldstream reports that the parliamentarian "said he understood that it was in large part responsible for a swing in popular opinion, as shown by the polls, from forty-eight per cent to sixty-three per cent in favour of reform". Lord Arran concluded: "It is comforting to think that perhaps a million men are no longer living in fear" (2004: 360–61). In his biography, Bogarde also confirms the "countless letters of gratitude which flooded in" to him after his

performance in *Victim* (1979: 242). The evidence we have regarding the production and reception of *Victim* clearly established the restraints under which the producers toiled and the care with which they had to work; it also reveals that for some gay men the film was a significant, perhaps crucial, moment in their own self-realisation; while for many others it was possibly a watershed intervention in sexual politics, making smoother the path to legal reform. This is something for which the producers could be proud and of which critics of the film have made too little.

Victim also had a considerable influence on the representation of homosexuality in cinema. In the view of Vito Russo, the film's groundbreaking portrait of the pressures caused by hiding and the sense of despair of the homosexuals in the film removed it from the category of films that dealt only with "harmless amorphous sissies" and "made gays real" (1987: 132). This was significant progress and paved the way for further responses from filmmakers. In terms of British cinema, gay characters began to appear with more regularity, and homosexuality began to be represented with more sympathy and complexity in films such as *The Leather Boys* (1963), *The Family Way* (1966) and *If...* (1968). The period culminated in *Sunday, Bloody Sunday* (1971), the first mainstream film to include an on-screen kiss between two males, and in which director John Schlesinger with "intelligence, sensitivity and honesty [...] explores an emotional, bisexual triangle, involving three people in a painful search for love and happiness" (Bourne, 1996: 237). The film, still controversial, was, like *Victim*, a major turning point in the depiction of gays in the cinema. From this point onwards, the gay liberation movement would make itself increasingly felt in the cinema, and openly gay filmmakers like Derek Jarman would radically alter the framework of treating homosexuality in British film.⁵³

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53 On Jarman, see Lippard (1996) and Wymer (2005).

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