International sexpionage! European popular film on sixties British cinema screens

Article  (Accepted Version)


This version is available from Sussex Research Online: http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/99434/

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies and may differ from the published version or from the version of record. If you wish to cite this item you are advised to consult the publisher’s version. Please see the URL above for details on accessing the published version.

Copyright and reuse:
Sussex Research Online is a digital repository of the research output of the University.

Copyright and all moral rights to the version of the paper presented here belong to the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. To the extent reasonable and practicable, the material made available in SRO has been checked for eligibility before being made available.

Copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided that the authors, title and full bibliographic details are credited, a hyperlink and/or URL is given for the original metadata page and the content is not changed in any way.
Introduction

When they talked about films all they would talk were units… It really makes you want to give up the business. I don’t think they cared about film, as such… they didn’t know anything about them, and they didn’t quite know how they happened, it was a mystery… Basically a good film was one that made money. (Michael Armstrong)¹

Writer and director Michael Armstrong, whose low opinion of distributors and the money-men of the film industry is particularly evident in his script for the satirical sex comedy *Eskimo Nell* (1975, Martin Campbell, UK: Salon productions), also described distributors as “vegetables.”² Their motivation may have been purely financial, but their eagerness to turn a quick buck meant that hundreds of cheaply made continental films of varying quality found their way onto British screens, and this was not restricted to the arthouse cinemas attended by the metropolitan elite. Films from across Europe also found their way to audiences in the provinces, as my research has uncovered. Hollywood and British films of this period have been documented and analysed many times over.³ What appears to have been less regarded is the concept of British audiences being exposed to a much wider variety of international cinema. For the average British cinema-goer at the time the experience was potentially barely British at all.

The aims of this article are to contextualise and analyse some of those distributors of the 1960s with a specific focus on the popular European films they imported. One purpose of this research is to demonstrate how diverse British cinemas were during that period, with films being shown in mainstream cinemas from all over Europe. This provides new understanding into historical British film distribution and British film audiences, and raises important issues around ‘Europeanisation’ that need to be considered when discussing 1960s British culture.

This article examines the output of some of the main national contributors to European cinema during that time, particularly Italy and France. As will be seen, Italy was one of the most prolific producers of popular film during this period. The films selected are mainly from
popular genres, rather than the more traditional view of world cinema as art-house films, although there was often a crossover between the two, in what Mazdon and Wheatley described as the “sex/art binary.” This dichotomy or opposition between the original film texts and their British distribution can be analysed in relation to examples of now-respected European films which were distributed as adult entertainment.

These are films which for the most part had their nationality obscured by the time they reached UK cinemas; they had gone through a process of “de-ethnification,” including retitling, anglicising names in the credits and dubbing. During production many of the films themselves deliberately avoided a “clear historical or geopolitical context” in order to sell to as many countries as possible. As well as being examples of the ‘Europeanisation’ of British culture in the 1960s, these films are also examples of the ‘Britishisation’ of European culture, once the “de-ethnification” process was completed.

Although the national cinemas of many countries have been studied from a cultural and industrial perspective, I feel that what happened to the films once they arrived in Britain needs further analysis. An attempt to define ‘British cinema’ needs to consider the films that were available to the public as well as the films produced on home soil. Higson argues that “cultural diversity within a national film-culture may just as easily be achieved through encouraging a range of imports as by ensuring that home-grown films are produced,” and it is the intention here to prove that cultural diversity was achieved in the 1960s through this process. This research is only the beginning of this process, and raises questions for further study, particularly regarding the impact these European films had on audiences.

This research relies heavily on surviving archival material. Of especial value were the archives of the British Board of Film Classification, where documentation in the form of letters between distributor and censor allow something of the character of those involved to come through, along with details of censorship requirements. These enable a better idea of how the films would have looked by the time audiences saw them, and the final certificate awarded tells us something about the intended audience.

In order to provide clarity when discussing certification later in this article, it is worth knowing that from 1951 to 1970 the British Board of Film Censors (the word ‘Censors’ was replaced by ‘Classification’ in 1984) ratings were as follows:
‘U’ – “Universal”
‘A’ – “No admission to under 16s unless accompanied by an adult”
‘X’ – “Incorporated old H and limited audience to those over 16 years,” introduced in 1951. The ‘H’ certificate was introduced in 1932 in the wake of the Universal horror films, and stood for “Horrific.”

With the exception of private cinema clubs, not-for-profit exhibitions (e.g. trade shows, press screenings) or current newsreels, no film could be shown in the UK without a certificate, awarded either by the BBFC or the local authority. Therefore, certification was a vital process which each distributor went through.

Other research materials used include posters, press books and other ephemera, alongside interviews conducted with people who worked in the film industry.

Although European films covering a range of genres and potential audiences were distributed during the 1960s, to enable some depth of discussion this article will focus on examples of just three; the ‘peplum,’ the ‘Eurospy’ and the ‘sexploitation’ film. Each of these types of film were popular with UK audiences and as such were imported in large quantities during the 1960s, and concentrating on these will enable a depiction of the industrial practices under discussion, whilst covering a range of possible audiences. The films covered in this article come from Italy, France, Germany and Sweden, and many of them, particularly the Eurospy films, were co-productions. This type of arrangement was common in Western European popular film production and will be explored in more detail below.

To begin with, let us reach back far into the mists of time, where men wore tiny tunics.

**Peplum**

For seven years from 1959 an Italian genre or *filone* known as the peplum gave British audiences images of well-oiled strongmen and scantily-clad women in epic adventures across vast swathes of history and mythology. During this brief period, from the release of *Hercules (Le fatiche di ercole, 1958, Pietro Francisci, Italy: O.S.C.A.R. Film/ Galatea Film)* to the time the *filone* died out on a mass scale in favour of the Spaghetti Western, Burke claims that around 200 films were produced. Solomon proposes that between 1960 and 1965 three or four dozen peplum films were produced in Italy per year, which would put the total nearer to 300. Bondanella estimated a slightly more conservative 170, using the dates 1957 to 1964.
His research suggests approximately 10% of all Italian film produced in this period belonged to the peplum genre.\textsuperscript{12}

They became known as ‘peplum’ films because of the association French film critics made with the type of Greek tunic often worn by the characters on screen, and peplum is the most common word used when discussing the genre with any degree of seriousness.

The main theoretical and analytical approaches to the peplum are to view them through either a lens of haptic homoeroticism and sexuality, such as the work of Rushing\textsuperscript{13} and Hunt,\textsuperscript{14} or as prime examples of camp, as epitomised in the writing of Susan Sontag.\textsuperscript{15} Rushing focuses on the way that the action within the peplum often halts so that the camera can spend time lingering over the taught muscular frame of the hero. Rushing notes that in ancient Greece the peplum was “an article of female clothing,”\textsuperscript{16} which adds a further layer of transgressive sexuality to the films. These strong, heroic men are effectively wearing drag.

The results of my research prove that a sexualised, camp view of the peplum ignores the fact that in almost every case, when repackaged in the UK, these films were distributed and exhibited for young audiences. Of the fifty-five titles researched, forty-six were released with “U” certificates, with many being cut to achieve that rating.

Although around 200 to 300 peplum films were produced in Italy from 1959 to 1966, only around a quarter of these were imported into the UK.\textsuperscript{17} These films were very important to independent distributors, as noted in the Institute for Economic Affairs report on the British film industry in 1966:

> Many of them deal in second features or dubbed continental works. The musclemen, monsters and maniacs of many of the latter, if of debatable artistic merit, provide a vital reserve of screen material for lean times which makes independent cinema-owners anxious to keep such distributors in business.\textsuperscript{18}

Tony Klinger, son of Compton Films co-founder Michael Klinger, recalled the work the peplum films sometimes required before distribution:

> We called them Italian films I guess. They would be almost identical to the American films, with a similar title. Films like Fury of the Vikings.\textsuperscript{19} Actually, the films weren’t that bad. I remember doing the pos-cutting of some of those. We had to pos-cut it because the sequences didn’t make sense.\textsuperscript{20} We had to help them a bit, and we’d get them re-voiced as we got better at it.\textsuperscript{21}
The success of *Hercules* in Britain and the US was in large part due to the promotional talents of the American independent producer and distributor Joseph E. Levine. He had already experienced great financial returns on his acquisition of the Japanese giant-monster thriller *Gojira* (1954, Ishirō Honda, Japan: Toho Film), which he cut, dubbed and added additional sequences to before releasing it as the child-friendly *Godzilla, King of the Monsters!* (1956, Ishirō Honda & Terry O. Morse, USA/ Japan: Toho/ Jewell Enterprises). Having developed relationships within the Italian film industry through such acquisitions as the historical epic *Atilla* (1954, Pietro Francisci, Italy/ France: Compagnie Cinématographique de France/ Lux Film) in 1958, Levine was in the perfect position to buy the rights to what could be his next big thing. He told a reporter at the time, “You never can tell… your next million could be lying in a tin can in Europe.”

Joseph Levine bought the international distribution rights to *Hercules*, a “foreign, badly dubbed, and shoddily-made” film, starring American bodybuilder and former Mr. Universe Steve Reeves, for only $120,000. He spent a further $120,000 on dubbing and reediting. He exceeded his own reputation for showmanship when he launched a then unheard of unheralded $1 million exploitation, or marketing, campaign which ran for a month before releasing the film on 635 prints, which according to McKenna took the record for being the highest number of prints of a single film in circulation. During its circulation *Hercules* was shown on around 11,000 American cinema screens. Levine targeted as wide an audience as possible, creating tie-in comics and a soundtrack album and placing full-page ads in 132 magazines including “under-the-counter beefcake magazines” to specifically target gay male audiences. Whether a similar approach was taken to target gay subcultures in the UK with *Hercules* is something which requires further research. This campaign paid off, making a success not only of the film but of Joseph Levine himself, propelling him into the limelight and securing his lasting reputation as a skilled promotor. That level of saturation marketing and exhibition was ground-breaking for its time and would not be taken up seriously by the Hollywood studios as a business model until the mid-1970s.

Joseph E. Levine had successfully demonstrated that it was indeed possible to find your next million in a tin can in Europe, something which Michael Klinger noticed, and which gave him the encouragement to move into film distribution. Tony Klinger explained:
It was the *Hercules* film that convinced my dad that there was legs in it if you did the right marketing and publicity, hence his relationship with Tony Tenser [co-founder of Compton]. That's what Tony did, he was very good at that kind of stuff, PR stunts, stuff like that. He wasn’t so good at production or other stuff, but he was very good at spotting a marketing opportunity. The deal that Levine did, I can’t remember what it was, but I remember that they had a $1 million thing for *Hercules* and did a brilliant job. He made this little film into a huge film, and Steve Reeves into a star. He showed the way those things could be done.\textsuperscript{27}

*Hercules* was picked up in the UK by Archway Film Distributors, a small Soho company run by two men: Arthur Gelardi and Sydney Goodman. It did not appear to come packaged with anything near the level of ballyhoo Levine was using in the States, as evidenced by its rather lacklustre campaign booklet.\textsuperscript{28} They appear to have had little idea of the film’s potential and just put it out as part of a roster of imported films and British B-pictures.\textsuperscript{29}

*Hercules* received a ‘U’ certificate from the BBFC in 1959 without cuts. Archway’s publicity described the film as being “The mighty saga of the world’s mightiest man!”\textsuperscript{30} The main poster image used is of Hercules pulling against chains, his muscles bulging and veins popping, one which would be consistently repeated in future peplum promotional material. Little original promotional material for the UK release of *Hercules* still exists, likely because it was a relatively minor release from a small distribution company. The film was shown briefly in London’s West End before receiving “a few scattered showings in independent cinemas.”\textsuperscript{31} It did receive some critical notice, described by one British critic as “an adventure yarn for all ages, though hardly recommended to Hellenists.”\textsuperscript{32} *The Times* noted that *Hercules* actor Steve Reeves had “a remarkable physique but no noticeable acting ability.”\textsuperscript{33}

*Hercules* may have been a small film in the UK, but the same cannot be said for its US release, where it was the fourth-highest grossing film in 1959, making a profit of $5 million.\textsuperscript{34} This stateside success encouraged Joseph E. Levine to try a bigger UK release for the sequel *Hercules Unchained*, (*Ercole e la regina di Lidia*, 1959, Pietro Francisci, Galatea Film/ Lux Film/ Lux Compagnie Cinématographique de France, Italy/ France/ Spain) which was distributed by Warner-Pathé in 1960 with a budget and reach to match Levine’s enthusiasm for showmanship. A huge fold-out campaign booklet was made for prospective exhibitors which informed them that “Starting July, the doors open on the mightiest advertising campaign ever accorded an entertainment in the United Kingdom!” This advertising campaign would include whole page advertisements in national daily, Sunday and local newspapers and magazines, a nationwide outdoor publicity campaign (using 500 billboards),
and a nationwide television advertising campaign. It was described as a “Gigantic exploitation campaign”.

With “the biggest saturation campaign that the United Kingdom had ever seen,” the public were “blinded by the ballyhoo, stunned by the sales talk and pummelled by the propaganda,” until they caved in, making *Hercules Unchained* “the most successful film shown in Britain’s 4,000 cinemas during the 12 months ended October 21, 1960.” McKenna’s research shows that with Warner-Pathé’s help Joseph E. Levine broke a British record for the number of prints of a single film in simultaneous circulation: more than 500. It was reported that the saturation marketing campaign, with “Newspaper advertisements, posters, handouts and ‘tie-ups’ with various goods on sale in the shops at the time,” and “Television advertising on a scale hitherto undreamt of for a cinema film,” cost over £50,000, or “More than most of the French ‘New Wave’ films actually cost to make.”

British magazine *Films and Filming* were derisive, claiming that “This is a classic example of the public being forced to like what it gets and being powerless to get what it likes.”

*Hercules Unchained* demonstrates the type of market saturation which is now commonplace in mainstream 21st century cinema. No matter where you were in 1960, you were never far from *Hercules Unchained*. Despite the presence of an American star, and the marketing power of Levine, British audiences, or at least film reviewers, still seemed to be aware of its Italian origins if the tone of the contemporary reviews is to be taken as evidence: “This sequel to the same director’s *Hercules* and addition to the current Italian series of comic strip Greek legend is rather less funny than some, though its florid American-dubbed dialogue is full of choice moments.”

This sense of Europeanness could be picked up in the elaborate sets, the decadent sexuality (for a large section of the film, Hercules effectively becomes a sex slave), the locations and studio recreations of ancient architecture, but perhaps most of all in the sense that Hercules was rooted in the same mythology that was taught in classics lessons and read in adventure story books. These were stories that were mostly enjoyed as children, a serious study of the classics being something of a minority interest among adults compared with mainstream cinema audiences. This means that the films could rely on a child’s willing suspension of disbelief, and on an adult’s hazy memory of the original stories.

Available box office data for the 1960s shows that only twice in the entire decade did a European film appear in the top ten most popular films of the year: *Hercules Unchained* in 1960 and *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (*Il buono, il brutto, il cattivo*, 1966, Sergio Leone, Italy/
Spain/ West Germany: Produzioni Europee Associati (PEA), Arturo González Producciones Cinematográficas/ S.A/ Constantin Film) in 1968, when the popularity of the Spaghetti Western was at its height. This demonstrates the significant role Italian popular cinema played in British cinemas during the 1960s, and proves just how successful the marketing of Hercules Unchained was in 1960, when the peplum film was yet to reach its cinema screen saturation in 1963.

Dozens of peplum films followed Hercules and Hercules Unchained into Britain, many through independent distributors such as Compton-Cameo, who having opened the Compton Cinema Club in October 1960, moved quickly from importing adult films to also providing family entertainment. Both Tony Tenser and Michael Klinger were skilled in spotting and exploiting cinematic needs, and in 1963 they picked up at least six peplum epics.

It is difficult to pinpoint exactly what caused the increase in the number of peplum films imported during 1963. A noticeable decline in UK cinema audience figures had begun post-WWII, when audience figures were at their peak at over 1,635 million. By 1960 cinema admissions were down to 501 million, but by 1963 that figure had decreased further to 357 million. This still translated to a gross box-office of £57 million. Admissions were seemingly locked in a downward spiral, which saw audience admissions at 289 million by 1966, the end of the peplum cycle. It is therefore possible that this increase in the distribution of the peplum was part of a strategy by distributors to combat declining audience figures. Being cheap to acquire, and appealing to a wide audience, the peplum would be an important element in keeping cinema seats filled.

One final, less well-known example of the peplum is Jason and the Golden Fleece (I giganti della Tessaglia (Gli argonauti, 1960, Ricardo Freda, Alexandra Produzioni Cinematografiche/ Société Cinématographique Lyre, Italy/ France), distributed by Compton-Cameo in 1963. The film was originally submitted to the BBFC under the direct translation from the Italian as The Giants of Thessaly. After submitting the film for classification Compton opportunistically changed the name to Jason and the Golden Fleece to capitalise on the release of Jason and the Argonauts (1963, Don Chaffey, UK/ USA: Charles H. Schneer Productions) earlier that year. The film received a ‘U’ certificate following two cuts; one for violence and one for sexual violence; when the villain threatens to rape Jason’s wife, the Queen. This is an indicator that the intended audience were children.
**Jason and the Golden Fleece** differs slightly from other peplum films explored in this chapter in that it is not focused on one main character with Herculean strength. Jason is the king of Thessaly, but he is an ordinary mortal with regular strength and not the usual superhuman abilities. He has the Argonauts with him, so called because they are sailing aboard the ship built by Argo, and together they perform most of the feats described as “STUPENDOUS EXCITEMENT – DAZZLING THRILLS – BREATHTAKING ADVENTURE” in the Compton campaign book. The “Giants of Thessaly” referred to in the film’s original title are the Argonauts themselves, who are giants among men because they represent the bravest, strongest citizens of Thessaly, with Jason as their king. In the original versions of the legend Hercules himself sailed with the Argonauts but he is missing here, perhaps because Riccardo Freda wished to distance this film from the dozens of other Hercules films out at the same time.

Compton’s campaign book gives suggested catchlines for exhibitors to use in their cinemas to grab audience attention:

SEE – The exciting adventures of Jason in his search for the Golden Fleece!
SEE – The island of beautiful women – but there was evil in their embrace!!!!
SEE – The hideous monster whose anger was appeased with human offerings!!
SEE – The savage cruelty of the usurper in Jason’s court!!
SEE – The hidden temple in the mountain where the sacred Golden Fleece is hidden!!
SEE – The lovers banished on a raft to the high seas!!
SEE – The fury of the Giants as they smash the terror of the mercenaries!!

Notice that the point about beautiful women was given four exclamation marks, stressing the potential sex appeal the film might have for any adults, or at least parents, in the audience. These catchlines act as both advertisements and a useful plot summary, distilling the film down to its essential moments and demonstrate Compton’s typical hyperbole and exaggeration.

The peplum film enjoyed great theatrical success in the UK, particularly with independent distributors who could acquire rights relatively cheaply and exploit the films in cinemas throughout the country. It is difficult to assess what impact the constant presence of these Italian peplum films had on contemporary British culture, with there being a lack of recorded evidence. Some writing, such as that by the aforementioned Robert Rushing, suggests that their main impact was in their status as camp. It is possible that there was perhaps a minority in the audience who were there to laugh knowingly, and perhaps see these films for their
latent homoerotic spectacle. It was not until 1967 that the Sexual Offences Act, “ended (in England and Wales) the long and barbaric tradition whereby homosexuals had been subject to persecution and blackmail.”49 Perhaps the dark haven offered by cinema screenings of peplum films offered men a safe space to enjoy that homoerotic spectacle onscreen whilst making social connections. Writer David McGillivray recalls, in occasionally explicit detail, the way in which London cinemas were used in the 1970s as spaces for gay men to meet, but as yet there is no real evidence in print of this occurring in the previous decade.50

Nonetheless it is still the conclusion of this writer that the majority of the contemporary British audiences were children. For an adult audience, the popularity of the genre could also be attributed the fact that the films “Reaffirmed the worth of the individual male power – and potency – at a time when radical social, economic and political transformation, in Italy and elsewhere, was generating a sense of instability and corresponding anxiety.”51 Yet for the child and adolescent in the audience the peplum film offered a strong hero unencumbered by troubling romantic distractions and a sense of moral rectitude, whilst for teenagers audiences there were the visual pleasures on offer, whether it was the body of “The strongest athlete in the world,”52 or the opportunity to witness “Beauty sacrificed to wild beasts!”53

The growth of the Italian industry attracted investors and studios from around Europe, which lead to co-productions becoming the standard position for other popular genres, including the next to be discussed here. Exact statistics are hard to calculate, but according to my own research forty-five European co-productions were distributed in the UK in 1960, and this increased to fifty-eight in 1961. Some of these were co-produced with British production companies, and producers such as Harry Alan Towers became particularly adept at putting film projects together with money and talent from various European countries throughout the decade. Perhaps rather than look for a specific influence from the peplum as a genre, one needs to consider their ‘Europeanising’ effect of these films on the film industry itself, in which their success encouraged people like Towers to embrace the opportunities Europe had to offer British production.

As the peplum began to lose popularity, the Italian sword-and-sandal hero morphed almost seamlessly into the suave, womanising secret agent of the Eurospy film, whose international (co-production) adventures and contemporary glamour gripped British audiences and tapped into a need for global certainty in an increasingly unpredictable decade.
Eurospy

By the early 1960s Britain’s Empire had all but crumbled; its standing as a military power was diminished by the nuclear arms race, India had gained independence and the Suez Canal crisis caused waves across what remained of the Empire, demonstrating a weakened nation to the world, all of which contributed to a gradual withdrawal of Britain from its other territories and dominions. The British were collectively licking their wounds in the 1950s, politically and culturally whilst European countries came together to form a unified European Economic Community. Britain was not only perceived by Europe as “A philistine nation in high culture, but her popular culture was derivative and second-rate, coming almost exclusively from America and, in the case of youth fashion, also from Italy.” This perception, the view from outside, was to be reversed in the following decade, when the world celebrated, and often imitated, British popular culture.

Things began to change in the early 1960s, when a much-celebrated (and documented elsewhere) revolution fuelled a new sense of national identity, when it became great to be British again. The white male British masculinity of the working class hero, initially epitomised in the character of Arthur Seaton (Albert Finney) in Saturday Night and Sunday Morning (1960, Karel Reisz, UK: Woodfall Film Productions), was then given a suit, a gun and a licence to kill: The new figurehead of this rise in British cultural power was James Bond, a man for whom the world was still small and the reach of British power and influence large.

The original novels and Daily Express adaptations had been popular domestically, but it was Dr. No (1962, Terence Young, UK/ USA: Eon) that made the world wake up to Bond, “a nostalgic bandage for England’s wounded pride in the ‘post-colonial’-era.” Ian Fleming’s spy, based in small part on his own wartime experiences (and in large part on his own fantasies), was a cinematic return to a type of traditional British values of global power and authority. It is surely no coincidence that those villains who conspired against British interests for criminal gain were invariably foreign, or at least expatriate, and often physically deformed. The Bond films presented a reprise in the idea of the world as an adventurers’ playground.

Yet Bond was not the only heroic, lone-wolf figure to be involved in espionage and intrigue for his country during this period. France, Germany, Italy and many other countries were also producing spy-themed action films which became known retrospectively as the Eurospy.
Here the focus is on two films which were distributed in the UK in the 1960s, part of the Agent 077 trilogy; *Mission Bloody Mary* (*Agente 077 missione Bloody Mary*, 1965, Sergio Grieco, Italy/ France/ Spain: Fida Cinematografica, Época Films S.A., Les Productions Jacques Roitfeld) and *From the Orient With Fury* (*Agente 077 dall’oriente con furore*, 1965, Sergio Grieco, Italy/ France/ Spain: Fida Cinematografica, Les Productions Jacques Roitfeld, Época Films S.A.).

It is perhaps in this genre more than any other that we see the ‘Europeanising’ process at work in British cinemas. Audiences may well have engaged with these films, shot throughout Europe, as a way of dealing with a sense of isolationism and decline as the continent seemed to be flourishing without them. The travelogue nature of many Eurospy films might well have also helped contribute towards the rise in popularity of the European package holiday in the 1960s, the glamorous locations onscreen fuelling trips to the travel agents.

As with most popular genres during the 1960s, filmmakers around the globe, and Italy in particular, increased exponentially the number of spy-themed films in production. There were hundreds of spy and espionage-themed movies which generally took their lead from Bond himself, or from Hitchcock’s ‘wrong man’ films epitomised by *North by Northwest* (1959, Alfred Hitchcock, USA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM)).

A contemporary report in a British tabloid highlighted the popularity of the genre when discussing the arrival of a Hollywood star in Rome:

> His code number: “Agent 009.” His off-screen name: Stewart Granger. His mission: To film yet another epic of sex and espionage.
> A profitable business this. Thanks to Bond, spy films are flourishing in the Italian and Continental market. In Rome, for example, Bond’s latest, “Thunderball”, is showing in four cinemas. Competing in mayhem at a dozen others: “007 – From the Orient With Fury,” “Agent OSS 117 – Fury in Bahia,” and “077 Mission Bloody Mary.”
> Agent 009 Granger now treads portentously on to the screen.

The article begins in the comic-style of introducing a spy and his mission, and the sardonic tone employed here (“another epic of sex and espionage”) suggests that even by 1966 people were growing tired of the spy film. James Bond had “provided a way for Britishness to continue to be defined in opposition to the ‘dark’ people of the world,” but the question has to be asked as to whether national imperialism was also being reinforced when the films had a European origin, or if pastiching Bond meant the flag-waving was lost. As we will see with
Agent 077, could an American secret agent as written and directed by Italians conflate his own national identity with “racial sovereignty”?62

The Agent 077 films were a co-production between France, Spain and Italy, and consequently the plots generally involve Dick Malloy (Ken Clark) having to travel speedily between locations in the three countries as the action unfolds. The locations tended to be shared between France and Spain, with the interiors being shot at Cinecittà Studios in Rome, along with all the post-production processes.

Both Mission Bloody Mary and From The Orient With Fury had been picked up for distribution in the UK by Compton Film Distributors. They may have supervised an English dub (it is difficult to be sure as films were often dubbed in Italy before export), but they otherwise left the films themselves intact. Through the co-production status and UK distribution processes films often lost any individual international identity, which was part of that de-ethnification process previously mentioned. Concern over European co-productions losing their cultural identity was voiced as early as 1962 by Sidney Cole, a founding member of the Association of Cinema and Television Technicians (ACTT):

The kind of cosmopolitan film which has been made in great numbers in Europe in the last few years, highbudgeted [sic] spectacles with international casts, many of which might have been made on the moon for all the relation they bear to any recognisable specific European culture and tradition… the deathly elimination of the best kind of native film, that springs from the roots of a country and expresses something of the living reality of its people.63

The process of dubbing and retitling, to make them more commercially exploitable, meant that a film was often almost totally devoid of any national context once it made its way into British cinemas. It was Bergfelder who described the way that national boundaries and identities are removed in cinema as de-ethnification, and the Agent 077 films, indeed Eurospy films at large, are perfect examples of this.64 This is in part due to a shift from national cinema to a more homogenised European cinema during the 1950s and 1960s thanks to an increase in bilateral or multinational co-productions which took advantage of tax breaks and other incentives provided through this increased level of European cooperation. Bergfelder points out that in West Germany between 1963 and 1964 the number of co-productions more than doubled, “and for the rest of the decade they consistently out-numbered purely indigenous films.”65 The Agent 077 films are good examples of the practical benefits of the European co-production, as they spend a lot of time travelling between (usually) Paris, Rome and
Barcelona. Despite this the European accents remain the same, and the visual trappings are representative of a homogenous concept of ‘Europe,’ where our hero could be anywhere on the continent. *From the Orient With Fury* goes one step further; whereas the other films in the series present an American against virtually the whole of Europe, this film positions the West against the East, with the West being America and Europe, and the East being a version of the Orient as represented by Istanbul and Asian cast members. Effectively the film is pan-European, where national differences are subsumed into this notion of West versus East. Perhaps the fears generated by the Cold War are more important than the identity of individual nationhood.

There is currently a lack of firm audience data to identify whether audiences knew the origins of the films they were watching. Oral histories gathered by Emma Petts on 1960s British cinema audiences suggest that despite a film being given an English title, they still knew they were going to see something “foreign.” The implicit expectation is that this meant they would see something with “progressive sexual attitudes.” Further comparative research into Italian audiences of the same period is still needed, to see if they were fooled by this de-ethnicifying, homogenising process of filmmaking. Did Italians, or for that matter any Western Europeans, truly believe that when they were watching Agent 077 up there on the flickering screen that he was a Hollywood hero? Or did they see if for what it was: B-grade American beefcake running around Europe playing Bond?

Reviewing the censorship records for these films enables us to get some notion of how the genre was considered by the British film industry at the time. *Mission Bloody Mary* was submitted to the BBFC and given an ‘X’ certificate on April 21, 1966 after four cuts, despite the violence and sexual content being similar in tone and frequency to the average James Bond film. The BBFC were generally more lenient towards films that they felt were of higher artistic quality or were from the bigger studios. This did not necessarily mean that they targeted European films any more differently that UK or American films as a rule, it was more on a case by case basis. In this particular case study, the films under discussion were often censored more strictly because of this perception of a lack of quality, and that the films were disposable. In most cases they were, and the distributors felt the same way.

By way of comparison, *From Russia With Love* (1963, Terence Young, UK; MGM) was given an ‘A’ certificate in 1963 and *Thunderball* (1965, Terence Young, UK: MGM) an ‘A’ in 1965. The ‘A’ certificate meant a film was generally suitable for a family audience, in that anyone
under sixteen had to be accompanied by an adult. Because the average Eurospy did not enjoy the same prestige they tended to be treated far more harshly by the BBFC. Documentation in the BBFC archive gives an indication as to why. Eight cuts were requested by the BBFC for *From The Orient With Fury*, and the Compton sales agent queried this with John Trevelyan:

> Be the first to admit that I am the last to argue; but I am quite sure when you look at the exceptions slip, on a film which is so typical of hundreds today, and typical of countless others that can be seen on television, I am more astonished to see the list of exceptions which reduce the picture to something very much worse than it is at the moment – and believe me, it is not ‘GONE WITH THE WIND’ to start with….

It is not unusual to find this level of self-deprecation when distributors are discussing European films with the BBFC which they have submitted for certification. The sales agent closes his letter:

> I do not, of course, want to get into any area of crossing swords or arguing with you. I think this is futile. However, it may be that a re-examination could throw a little fresh light on these rather savage cuts.

In John Trevelyan’s reply two days later the attitude of the BBFC towards the Eurospy are laid bare:

> These Continental imitations of James Bond give us much more trouble than the originals since they have less wit and lightness of touch, and at the same time over-do the violence and sex.

Although wit is surely culturally specific, it is hard to argue with his point that these films did often have “less wit and lightness of touch.” They were made quickly and cheaply and did not have the resources of a typical Bond production. It does seem that the European popular genres were subject to stricter censorship when the films are relatively anonymous or appeal predominantly to a popular audience, and not from a respected art-house director or featuring a star cast. Trevelyan had admitted as much in an interview the previous summer when he stated, referring in this instance to horror and sex comedies, “That is the sort of criticism we just cannot afford to bring on ourselves, unless we feel that it is in the cause of something culturally worthwhile and that we shall have the support of the intelligent minority in what we do.” It is clear that Eurospy films were also not, in the mind of John Trevelyan at least, supported by the “intelligent minority.” It could be argued that this was some sort of strategy to uphold and safeguard the British film industry in the face of European interference, but this is highly unlikely. As this paper sets out to prove, these European films were essential as
a consistent form of income for UK distributors and exhibitors, who would not get by on Hollywood and British films alone. Here again we see that European cultural product was vital to the UK, and whilst it may be difficult to pin down exactly how the films were ‘Europeanising’ their audiences, their very existence was keeping an industry afloat.

*From the Orient With Fury* required even more cuts than *Mission Bloody Mary*, as it appears that Compton wanted to achieve an ‘A’ certificate to achieve a wider distribution. These BBFC-required cuts would not have presented many continuity problems as far as the plot is concerned, although without the full violent content the film must have seemed particularly bland. This serves as a reminder that British audiences experienced a different version of the film to that seen in Europe.

It has been difficult to locate any archival or promotional material regarding *Mission Bloody Mary* so it is not clear how well the film was distributed in UK cinemas. Perhaps the ‘X’ certificate made it difficult to market. The film was reviewed in the trade press however so it was obviously screened somewhere, albeit briefly. *Daily Cinema* described *Mission Bloody Mary* as “Routine wine-women-and-wallop piffle on the international cloak-and-dagger circuit,” whilst *Monthly Film Bulletin* said it was “undistinguished espionage hokum… played out against a nice assortment of backgrounds.” It is no surprise to find the reviews being so dismissive. Even the most generous of reviewers could be forgiven for becoming jaded by the sheer volume of Eurospy films at that time, although most critics, like the BBFC, tended to favour art over commerciality. This reference to the backgrounds in the *Monthly Film Bulletin* review highlights an important generic expectation of the genre, which is that the films should be well-travelled and offer a kind of touristic experience for audiences.

Marketing materials do exist for *From the Orient With Fury*, which had a new poster commissioned by Compton. (fig.1) This suggests a more successful distribution for this, the second Agent 077 film, enabled because of the more accessible ‘A’ certificate. Using a moment of violence towards a woman, the female figure in the poster is a gagged and bound Evelyn Stone (Margaret Lee), helpless and in need of rescue from Agent 077, to whom her gaze is drawn. She is being held down by an unknown assailant in a suit, and her prone position reveals her legs, giving the poster some requisite glamour. Perhaps wishing to tone down overt sexuality due to the ‘A’ certificate, she is wearing a thick red outfit, rather than a bikini as is the standard for women in a James Bond poster of the period. The clothing is taken directly from the scene in the film this references, although in the film the colour of her outfit
is bright turquoise. Ken Clark’s clothing in the poster is unusually casual: with a long light brown jacket and red scarf, along with his gun raised towards the viewer, Agent 077 looks more like a cowboy than a secret agent. The only part of the design evocative of the Eurospy thriller is the title block itself, with the white writing set against a black and red striped background.

Often the promotional material provided by the original film studios was not considered appropriate or good enough by the distributor, and an alternative approach was taken. John Cohen, a member of the family who ran the independent Jacey cinema chain in the 1950s and 1960s, explained to me how the process worked. He was responsible for front-of-house and advertising publicity for their cinemas, and worked closely with independent distributors:

They said ‘John, can you come up with how best to advertise and put a display on the front of the cinemas?’ And when we looked at the material that they had got from France, or various countries in Europe, we felt, quite frankly, ‘It leaves me cold, it doesn’t appeal, I don’t think that’s going to bring any customers in!’ I would view the film and select different stills. We kept the title but sometimes I would introduce a catch line to make it more appealing to the British. Because I had done that a fair amount for people like Phil Kutner [at Miracle Films], these other smaller companies basically gave me a free hand, and said ‘Do what you can with it!’

It would appear with regards to *From the Orient With Fury* that a similar process was taken, at least in regard to the poster design.

The evidence here illustrates that Eurospy films offer insight into contemporary, post-colonial attitudes within Europe in the 1960s. More specifically, British audiences were reassured that despite the realities of their nation’s diminished global influence, on screen at least the world was in safe hands, even if those hands occasionally slapped or groped the women they were trying to save. The casual, misogynistic behavior of the secret agent towards the opposite sex in these films was however relatively tame compared to the hundreds of erotic films imported by Compton, Gala, E.J. Fancey and their competitors which would stretch, and eventually break, the bounds of the ‘X’ certificate, as we will discover.

**Sexploitation**

This section covers a selection of European films distributed by Compton, E.J. Fancey and Gala, most of which depicted sex or sexual situations of some form. There were many films
released in the UK at that time from around Europe – including France, Germany, Sweden and Denmark – of this type, often dramas but also occasionally thrillers, horror films, documentaries or even comedies which were repackaged and exploited for British audiences as sexualised entertainment. Many European films, particularly those from a neo-realist tradition, dealt with the subject of prostitution, and were often hard-hitting dramas highlighting the socio-economic plight of women in that profession. Once in the UK the films were taken, and sometimes altered, to appeal to a predominantly male audience with expectations that the films would be sexually explicit.

The archival material found during this research suggests that sex films were a big part of the business model of independent cinemas in London in the 1960s. A traditional British prudishness in the 1950s meant that most of this sex came from abroad, very often Europe. An attitude which equated sex with the continent had developed in the hearts (and loins) of the British public, what Andrew Sarris referred to as the “Ooh-la-la factor.” British audiences expected European films to be more adult than their British counterparts, and often European actresses would be brought in if a woman was required to be sexy on screen. Distributors such as Gala, Compton and Fancey were only too happy to provide as much cheaply made and marketed European films as they could get their hands on.

Former BBFC examiner Audrey Field commented that this period saw the arrival of “a huge army of naked ladies and gentlemen from all over Europe and the USA, who shall be nameless, for the very good reason that in their class of alleged acting the name does not matter.” These films were often critically derided. David McGillivray, film critic and screenwriter, stated that sex films, either European or British, “were characterised by inane writing, hack direction, amateurish performances, technical inadequacy and a consequent deficiency of entertainment value.” Regardless of this critical viewpoint, distributors continued to bring these films into the UK.

Compton Films, founded in 1960, first screened European nudist films in their own private cinema club on Old Compton Street in Soho before soon producing their own nudist and sex-themed films and acquiring their own chain of cinemas, including the 600 seat Scala in Birmingham and a smaller cinema on London’s Oxford Street. Soho, with its Greek restaurants and coffee bars was the cosmopolitan, European-infused heart of the British film and sex industries. Compton’s success as an exhibitor, production company and exhibition chain saw them expand throughout the 1960s whilst other mainstream exhibitors such as
Rank were closing cinemas.\(^1\) With that initial private cinema club they could import films and screen them without the need for a BBFC certificate, and sexploitation was a major part of their programming. A contemporary account notes:

The film shows at the Compton cinema and others are really only an extension of the French and Swedish films that can be seen elsewhere under an (X) certificate. The films with titles such as: Sin Crazy, Passionate Nights in Paris and the like, have not been given a certificate by the film censor, and they cannot be seen by the general public unless they are a member of a film club such as the Compton (you can become a member at the door). The torrid scenes shown in the films go so far, but not that far. Suspender belts, stocking tops, lace-trimmed knickers and exposed breasts are displayed in great profusion. The girls gavotte across the screen with their panting lovers hotly pursuing them from one bedroom to another and that is all there is to it.\(^2\)

This eye witness of the private cinema clubs of Soho in the mid-1960s paints a vivid picture of what one could expect thanks to this circumvention of the need for a rating certificate. Many of the films which one might expect to see in one of these establishments are now sadly unavailable for viewing, but one gets a sense from the extant marketing materials. An undated Compton Cinema Club brochure, featuring an artistic rendering of a naked couple on the cover, describes the establishment as:

LONDON'S ONLY
LUXURY
CINEMA CLUB
presenting
SPECIALISED
UNABRIDGED
NEW
FEATURE FILMS
for
ADULT AUDIENCES\(^3\)

Membership was 10 shillings per year, and the films then currently showing included *The Wild and the Naked* (*Wild Gals of the Naked West*, 1962, Russ Meyer, USA: Films Pacifica), *Nude in Charcoal* (1961, Philip A. Melilla, USA: Tempest Productions/ Premier Pictures Company), *Lorna* (1964, Russ Meyer, USA: Eve Productions), and one European film, *Copenhagen Call Girls* (*Villa Vennely*, 1964, Poul Nyrup, Denmark: Pingvin Films). The “nudie cuties” of Russ Meyer were just as popular with club members as the European sex films.

As mentioned above, Compton soon developed a distribution network across the UK, dubbing themselves “The name for Continentals!” Compton’s publicity director was Graham
Whitworth, a man whose sense of humour often came through in his marketing campaigns. By looking closely at his marketing strategy for this film we can see the way that idea of a European “Ooh-la-la factor” is being traded on.

In 1961 Compton Films acquired the comedy *Anonima cocottes* (1960, Camillo Mastrocinque, Italy/ France: Cocinor/ Les Films Marceau/ Titanus) for UK distribution. The plot concerned a banker who, after losing his job due to internal corruption, befriends a prostitute who employs her colleagues to help him get his life back. *Anonima cocottes* was retitled *The Call Girl Business* by Compton and the press book is devoted to images of women undressing or lying in bed, all wearing glamorous lingerie, under a tagline “For Allure… without Demure…”, accompanied by an explosion of adjectives “Teasing! Exciting! Provoking! Enticing!” The cover of the press book features Anita Ekberg and folds out revealing more information and imagery, promising that you will “See the belles of the bedroom at business in the boardroom!” The exhibitor is addressed directly by the press book as “Mr Showman,” under a section titled “Comptonship.” *The Call Girl Business* is described as “Sexy, saucy and satisfying!” featuring “a galaxy of curvaceous young females to add thrills with spicy entertainment in one of the Continent’s most exciting productions for some time. Here is another pulse-pounding picture for big box office business!” General publicity suggestions are made including the use of posters and front-of-house stills, but that distinctive eye for showmanship comes through in this suggestion:

**SPECIAL DISPLAY STUNT**
For an astonishing display use a large blown-up cut out of ANITA EKBERG or the lovely VALERIA FABRIZI in a seductive pose mounted on hardboard. Place an extension speaker behind the figure and wire to a tape recorder which at frequent intervals should relay a loud wolf whistle followed by a female seductive voice inviting onlookers to come and enjoy the pleasures of THE CALL GIRLS BUSINESS.84

*Monthly Film Bulletin’s* review suggests that Compton’s repackaging of this Italian-French film could leave audiences feeling mislead: “Anita Ekberg is splendidly decorative in a comedy that badly needs some kind of distraction to keep from boring to death the audiences who will clearly expect something different from the English title.”85 This is indicative of the kind of appropriation which Compton and other distributors were often guilty of. They were obviously trying to exploit every possible element of sexual activity out of their property, and it is not unreasonable to imagine that every single shot of a woman in lingerie in the film, Ekberg in particular, has been used as a promotional image.
It is not known whether any cinema owners in the UK took Graham Whitworth seriously and set up hidden speakers in their auditorium to wolf-whistle at their customers. Compton enjoyed the showmanship aspect of distribution, stemming not only from Tony Tenser’s previous experience at Miracle Films but also from Michael Klinger’s previous career: he ran the Nell Gwynn and Gargoyle clubs in Soho and had regularly supplied Tenser with dancing girls and strippers to promote Miracle’s films.

A distributor with a more high-brow reputation was Gala Film Distributors, formed by Kenneth Rive in 1951. He also controlled or owned six cinemas in London showing mainly continental films. ‘Continental’ in this context still often meant exploitation, since many of the films shown were films which the British censor had given an ‘X’ certificate but still had more sex content than was allowed in British or American films. According to Mazdon and Wheatley, Gala were the most prolific distributor in the 1960s for French films, distributing a total of seventy-eight films, as opposed to fifty-six for the next most prolific, Connoisseur. My own research into sex films distributed in the UK in the period 1960-1975 suggests that Gala were the second-highest distributor of Erotica. European cinema, whether it was Italian, French, German or Scandinavian, had a reputation in the UK for being sexier and more sophisticated than British or American film, and British film censors practically encouraged this perception, having been critical of British filmmakers whilst allowing certain prestigious European directors such as Ingmar Bergman or Mai Zetterling far more license. Night Games (Nattlek, 1966, Mai Zetterling, Sweden: Sandrews) for example received an ‘X’ certificate (following some brief cuts) in 1966 for distribution by Gala, despite some people, including Shirley Temple, regarding the entire film as pornographic. Gala also imported prestigious films alongside exploitation, such as work from Jean Luc Godard and François Truffaut, and Kenneth Rive also produced British films under the Galaworldfilm Productions banner.

Referring again to the “sex/art binary,” Mazdon and Wheatley point out that Rive’s marketing strategies for some of the arthouse films he would distribute, such as Hiroshima Mon Amour (Alan Resnais, 1959, France/ Japan: Argos Films/ Daiei Studios), were not all that different from Gala’s “existing reputation as exhibitors of risqué French film.” Referencing the quad poster, they describe the image of a “prostrate Emmanuelle Riva, eyes closed, her body sheltered by the broad, bare back of her lover,” and a large ‘X’ to emphasise what the press release describes as “a story of adult love.” As they succinctly summarise, “The
focus, it would appear, was placed on amour, rather than Hiroshima.”

This “sex/art binary” strategy is something we see in some examples from the non-arthouse output of Gala.

*Striptease de Paris* (*Mademoiselle Strip-tease*, 1957, Pierre Foucaud, France: Contact Organisation (Paris)/TV Cinéma/Cofrabel) is one such example of a directly ‘sexploitative’ film for Gala, and they received a long list of cuts from the BBFC when submitted in 1962. An ‘A’ certificate, rather than an ‘X’, had been requested by Gala, possibly because Rive was hoping for wider distribution. The cuts primarily consisted of removing shots featuring naked breasts.

John Trevelyan wrote in his memoirs that “Many people seem to think that a film censor has an enjoyable time watching films all day that show naked people copulating,” and the censor reports for the films being submitted by Gala and others do little to assuage that viewpoint. The list of cuts reveals the wider trend of what sexual material was being included by European directors in their films at that time. There is rarely any reference to male nudity or otherwise male-centered sexual activity, which reinforces the notion of erotic cinema primarily being made by men for a male audience; an argument supported by Laura Mulvey. The striptease films specifically address the notion of women being available for men to look at, in what Schaefer refers to as the “observational mode… rooted in a touristic gaze.”

*Striptease de Paris* featured Brigitte Bardot as a stripper, and was a comedy set in and around a Parisian strip club, the nudity evidently on display being typical for French films from this period. One can only imagine how disappointed audiences for a film about Parisian strippers were after it had been through the BBFC, but their requests did not stop with the requested cuts. The BBFC also wanted to see the subtitles and refused to grant a certificate until they had received “satisfactory assurances about publicity for the film.” These cuts were aimed at making the film fit the expectations of the ‘A’ certificate, one of the original film certificates from when the BBFC were established in 1913, which “indicated films that were considered especially appropriate for adult audiences,” but to which no age limit was imposed (Lamberti, 2012: 18). John Trevelyan explained the difference in the three certificates they worked with during that time:

In a ‘U’ film we could allow a man and a girl to be seen going together to a bedroom door; … in an ‘A’ film they could be seen going into the bedroom and up to the bed; … in an ‘X’ film they could be seen in or on the bed engaged in what appeared to be sexual intercourse provided that there was reasonable discretion in what was shown.
This is possibly the closest anyone came during that period to issuing any sort of guideline to filmmakers and distributors, and goes some way to clarifying how they approached the problem of sex in films. Of course, the concept of “reasonable discretion” allows for varied interpretation, and this desire on the part of the censors to avoid being overly explicit in their own language would give filmmakers the leeway they needed.

Another of Gala’s European imports which straddled the “sex/ art binary” was the Italian film *Hungry For Love*, (*Adua e la compagne*, 1960, Antonio Pietrangeli, Italy: Zebra Films), which was distributed in Italian with English subtitles despite the punning title change: the film is about prostitutes who set up a restaurant once the Merlin Law was enacted in 1959 and their brothel was closed. Given Kenneth Rive’s personal preference for art house cinema, and the prominent Italian names of the cast and director in the marketing it is not surprising that he would choose to retain the original Italian language track, but with the title change it is also clear that *Hungry For Love* was being marketed as a sex film to a particular audience who were not only his arthouse regulars. As Joan Hawkins points out, there was often a crossover between high and low cinematic culture for arthouse films when they could be classified as a “body genre,” which are films which, as Linda Williams notes, “privilege the sensational.”96 These “body genres” were identified as pornography, horror and melodrama, as each causes some form of physical reaction. Whilst *Hungry For Love* and other such films released at that time could never be mistaken for pornography, they could provoke arousal in the audience. “For many Americans,” explained Hawkins, “European art cinema retained a scandalous reputation that marked its difference from Hollywood cinema.”97 This was equally true for British audiences at that time.

Some British audience members may have been disappointed that the film was not what they expected given that there are more scenes in the kitchen than in the bedroom, but hearing characters talk about brothels and prostitution, and the pulchritude on display in the early scenes, could have been enough to see them through to the end. Whilst initially complimentary, describing “hints of depth in the characterisations,” *Monthly Film Bulletin* was critical of *Hungry For Love*, going on to complain that the script “becomes increasingly episodic and the clichés – including a sentimental child, a glib priest and a melodramatic pimp – abound.”98 This does seem overly critical, given that it is these scenes which lend the drama the opportunities for development and humanity in the four lead characters, and suggests that
the film did not meet audience expectations, spending too much time on “clichés” and not enough on the sex angle the advertising hints towards.

This research demonstrates the significant role of independent British distributors in the 1960s, and shows that European films about sex, or films which could be exploited for their sexual content, were a significant force in the programming of British cinemas, as a report from the Institute for Economic Affairs also pointed out in 1966:

Not every non-English-speaking film which is acclaimed by the critics manages to find screen space in the London art-houses. Of those that do and delight audiences, a minute number receive a nation-wide showing and then usually in a dubbed version and because there is an exploitable sex angle.99

These films kept money flowing back to distributors and producers which enabled Gala to promote a more prestigious arthouse cinema culture in Britain, and Compton invested the money made from these films into forming a vertically-integrated film empire.

One notable contribution towards a ‘Europeanising’ of the British film industry that these films made was in a levelling of the playing field. As has been noted, the BBFC were more predisposed towards European filmmakers than British filmmakers when it came to onscreen explicitness. Antonioni’s representation of ‘swinging London,’ Blow-Up (1966, Michaelangelo Antonioni, UK/ Italy: Premiere Productions/ Carlo Ponti Productions/ MGM), featured brief flashes of full-frontal female nudity but was considered to be a film of “quality and integrity,”100 so was awarded an ‘X’ certificate with no cuts. This set a precedent that allowed for full-frontal nudity to remain in other European films such as The Switchboard Operator (Ljubavni Slucaj ili tragedija sluzbenice P.T.T., 1967, Dusan Makavejev, Yugoslavia: Avala Film), which was sent to the BBFC with a note from the distributor that made his lack of artistic ambitions for the film clear: “I am sending you a film which has a few tits in it. I don’t think much of it but I can sell it to the sex theatres.”101 By 1968 the BBFC were prepared to pass the Swedish film Hugs and Kisses (Puss & Kram, 1967, Jonas Cornell, Sweden: Sandrews), which contains an important scene in which a woman stands naked in front of a mirror, but only after several local authorities had already passed the film uncut and no objections had been made in reference to Obscenity Laws.

The continued presence of erotic European films eventually wore down the steely reserve of the BBFC, and they could no longer withhold the same freedoms from British filmmakers.
This meant that the blackmail drama *Her Private Hell* (1968, Norman J. Warren, Piccadilly Pictures: UK) was able to present British audiences with sex and nudity happening right here on home soil, and this relaxation of restrictions contributed towards an eventual change in the way BBFC certification worked in 1970, when the minimum age for someone attending an ‘X’ film was raised to eighteen. Perhaps unsurprisingly however, the teenage girl at the heart of *Her Private Hell* was a European import, played by the Italian actress Lucia Modugno, so even when the Brits started to have sex on cinema screens, that “Ooh-la-la factor” still helped to make it acceptable, or even believable.102

**Conclusion**

British cinemas were awash with European popular films throughout the late 1950s through to the 1970s. Browsing issues of *Continental Film Review, Cinema X, Films and Filming* or other popular film magazines from the period reveals that films from all over Europe were filling the schedules of British cinemas. As this research suggests, the films from the mid to late 1960s were often exploited for their sexual content, but there were also plenty of other film types on offer. As well as the popularity of the peplum and Eurospy films, horror was another European genre that travelled well in the UK, and often British actors as well as Americans would find themselves in France or Italy providing the films with marquee value for distribution back home. In British cinemas there was an extraordinary breadth of world cinema on offer outside of the traditional parameters of the arthouse circuit, and as such this article offers an insight into the international film milieu of the time.

It is difficult to ascertain just how much influence this constant exposure to European films had on those audiences who sat there in the dark. Perhaps the travelogue nature of the Eurospy helped encourage Brits to see these exotic sights for themselves. The ancient ruins on offer in the peplum could have helped fuel coach trips to Rome and Pompeii. Onscreen visions of nudist camps in France or the sex tourism in Denmark and Amsterdam were almost certainly responsible for numbers of hopeful travellers heading to Europe for hedonism and dirty postcards. More research into this area is clearly needed.

Certainly, European co-production was not solely the domain of Europe itself. As well as actors heading abroad, British film-production companies also took advantage of European locations and financial incentives during the 1960s. Whether British films themselves demonstrate a clear influence of European cinema is perhaps harder to determine. As this
research has demonstrated, the Eurospy was a pastiche of the James Bond films, themselves British-American co-productions. The British rarely attempted the kind of mythological epic as seen in the peplum, and the censorship restrictions meant that sex was largely shied away from, until the BBFC finally capitulated and allowed filmmakers more artistic freedom. And so perhaps it is with the sex film that we can at least see a ‘Europeanising’ of British filmmaking, where filmmakers began to follow the example laid down by the Europeans: If their films with serious adult subject matter and a smattering of full-frontal nudity could make a fortune in the cinemas, they reasoned, then why not ours?

This article has shown that that popular European cinema was a vital component of the British film industry in the 1960s. These films helped to fill the demand cinemas had for product that the major studios alone could not fill. Independent distributors, following Joseph E. Levine’s lead with Hercules, continued to scour the film factories of Europe for product which would entertain British audiences and make a million. Without those hundreds of “musclemen, monsters and maniacs” which distributors like Compton or Gala supplied to eager audiences, many British exhibitors would not have survived.

Image caption:
Fig. 1: From the Orient With Fury quad poster. Author’s collection

Bibliography


1 Interview with Michael Armstrong by the author, 15 April 2015.
2 ibid.
4 Mazdon and Wheatley, *French Film in Britain*, 113.
5 Bergfelder, *International Adventures*, 218.
6 ibid.
9 Genres are often referred to as *filone* in Italian, which directly translates as “vein,” suggesting a long connected, flowing series of films.
15 Sontag, “Notes on ‘Camp,’”
16 Solomon, 2008: 164, italics in original.
17 Evidence presented by Kinnard & Crnkovich (2017) suggests that the number of peplum films sold to America was much higher, but this includes television packages. There is little current evidence to suggest that the peplum film was screened on British TV screens in the 1960s in anything like the same level.
19 *Fury of the Vikings* is now better known as *Erik the Conqueror* (*Gli invasori*, 1961, Mario Bava, Italy/ France: Galatea Film, Lyre Films, Critérion Film).
20 Post-cutting means editing the actual 35mm film prints.
21 Interview with Tony Klinger by the author, 30 May 2017.
22 Quoted in McKenna, *Showman of the Screen*, 43.
23 ibid. 44
24 quoted in McKenna, *Showman of the Screen*, 47.
26 McKenna, *Showman of the Screen*, 47.
27 Interview with Tony Klinger by the author, 30 May 2017.
28 *Hercules* press campaign booklet, Cinema Museum archive.
30 *Hercules* campaign booklet, Cinema Museum archive.
36 McKenna, *Showman of the Screen*, 61.
38 “Most Successful Film in Britain,” *The Times* (London, England), Thursday, Dec 08, 1960; pg. 18.
39 McKenna, *Showman of the Screen*, 55.
40 ibid.
42 “Ercole e la Regina di Lidia (Hercules Unchained), Italy/ France, 1959” *Monthly Film Bulletin*, August 1960,
Memories of Sexploitation Cinema in 1960s Britain', a paper given by Emma Petts at the 'Global Exploitation
Casino Royale
Interview with John Cohen by the author, July 15, 2015.
My own keyword research using the database of films submitted to the BBFC for certification between 1960
"Mission Bloody Mary," John Trevelyan interviewed by Arkadin in Film Clips, Sight and Sound v.34 (1 April 1965) Spring.
"Agente 077 – Missione Bloody Mary (Mission Bloody Mary), Italy/ Spain/ France, 1965," Monthly Film
My own keyword research using the database of films submitted to the BBFC for certification between 1960
and 1975 revealed that 1965-66 were the key years for films with the words "Spy" "Spying" and "Agent" in
the title: twenty in total.
Interview with John Cohen by the author, July 15, 2015.

One notable example being the casting of the French actress Simone Signoret in Room at the Top (1958, Jack Clayton, U.K. Remus Films).

Field, Picture Palace, 153
McGillivray, Doing Rude Things, 15
Norman, Soho Night and Day, 45.

Cinema Museum Archive. An advert in this brochure for The Windmill Cinema, “London’s most famous entertainment spot,” would place this as being no earlier than November 1964, when Compton reopened the legendary Windmill Theatre after converting it to a cinema.


Mazdon and Wheatley, French Film in Britain, 113.

I looked at films distributed in the UK from 1960 – 1975 by a keyword search on BBFC database and discovered that Gala were second only to Miracle Films in distributing films with such words as “sex”, “girl” and “love” in the title.


Mazdon and Wheatley, French Film in Britain, 113.

ibid.
Trevelyan, What the Censor Saw, 93
Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.”
BBFC Archive, Striptease de Paris file, undated Exceptions report.
Trevelyan, What the Censor Saw, 105
quoted in Hawkins, Cutting Edge, 4-5.
ibid. 22.

Kelly, A Competitive Cinema, 112.
Trevelyan, What the Censor Saw, 115.
ibid. 117.

Kelly, A Competitive Cinema, 70.