

Fine Tuning Film Classification

John Dickle suggests a new PG-13 classification would reduce classification anomalies

The most difficult decisions to make when classifying films and videos are not what should be done with the nasties, but the classification of films in the middle ranges.

There are at present four categories which the Office of Film and Literature Classification (OFLC) uses when making classification decisions.

These are:

G General (suitable for all ages) — children may view material without supervision, as no distress or harm is likely to be caused.

PG Parental Guidance (parental guidance recommended for persons under 15) — may contain adult themes or concepts which, when viewed by those under 15 years, require the guidance of a parent or guardian.

M Mature (recommended for mature audiences 15 years and over) — likely to disturb, harm or offend those under the age of 15 years. While most adult themes may be dealt with, the degree of explicitness and intensity of treatment will determine what can be accommodated in this classification.

R Restricted (restricted to adults 18 years and over) — likely to be harmful to those under 18 years and possibly offensive to some adults.

There is a further category of 'X' for videos which contains sexually explicit material between consenting adults with no violence or coercion. These videos are only available legally in the Australian Capital and Northern Territories.

Consumer advice

Since May 1989, each classified film and video has carried with it consumer advice. This consumer advice identifies the strongest elements of the film, for instance violence, language, sex, drug abuse or other anti-social elements.

Research has indicated that there was a widespread desire among parents in the community for as much specific information, not only about the strongest elements in films, but also an indication of the intensity of that element. After



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consultation with industry last year, the Board fine-tuned the consumer advice to give a more accurate indication of the intensity of the elements in the film. We now use terms such as a medium level violence and low level coarse language.

Many of the difficulties affecting classification on the 'PG' and 'M' border arise from films which have been given a 'PG-13' classification in the United States. This means that while they are still films where it is considered there should be parental input, it gives a specific pointer to 13 year olds and above for whom the material is considered suitable.

In the last couple of years there have been several blockbusters, clearly made with the youth market in mind, which have caused considerable classification difficulties for the OFLC.

In Australia, the OFLC has consistently taken the view that unless there are exceptional circumstances of context, 'fuck' language will not be permitted in the 'PG' category. While this may seem rather arbitrary, research indicates that there are large groups in the community which take grave exception to use of the magic word, even in isolation. However, this is no different to the classification system in the United States where use of similar language takes a film out of the 'PG' category and into the 'PG-13' category.

Thus on the language question alone, this creates stress on the Australian 'PG' category because in many instances the rest of the film could be quite suitable for audiences under 15 with parental input.

More important than language is the level of violence. For instance, the Film Censorship Board debated at great length about the appropriate category for *Batman*. While the Board considered it was not suitable for the younger children, it felt that children from perhaps the age of 12 onwards would be able to view it as an action movie and cope with the concepts they were able to discern when watching it. The Board felt it was not appropriate to exclude this group by issuing an 'M' certificate.

On the other side of the 'PG/M' border, many people felt puzzled about the 'M' rating given to the spectacularly popular *Crocodile Dundee*. It contains several uses of the magic word, some snorting of cocaine — even in a comic context — and the transvestite scene in the New York bar. While many people said they were puzzled by the 'M' decision, there were not many who opposed it.

Alternatives

The PG-13 category seems to have been successful in the United States in pointing viewers towards the appropriate age group. In the United Kingdom, the British Board of Film Classification has just classified its 100th film in the newly created 'PG12' category. The roof hasn't fallen in there or in the US and I suspect parents of early teenage children receive some additional guidance on the kinds of films more suitable for their early teenage children. I will consult fully with all parts of the industry and with consumers before thinking of recommending any changes to the four classification system we have.

The reasons why I think we should move slowly in this area is because we should give the community and concerned parents a chance to take advantage of the consumer advice.

The present system should not be regarded as immutable but we should try to preserve its simplicity and make it work by providing more information. If, after a fair trial period, it is not as effective as it might be, we should not be averse to some fine-tuning.

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