

## Certified

**Chinwe Izamoje, 17, investigates the current film classification system in the U.K. to see if it is still pertinent in light of the recent controversy surrounding the films Bruno and Antichrist.**



'There are certain things that should not be shown – how far do you go?' (Omar, 18).

In the summer of 2009, the release of the film *Antichrist* by Danish director Lars Von Trier received international attention for its portrayal of uncut sexual violence and thematic misogyny. Similarly, *Bruno* (2009) was deemed excessively controversial and had to be edited for a younger audience in the UK, while being banned in some European countries. This raises many unaddressed and difficult questions about film content and certification in the UK.

Is it good that films challenge the threshold of what is acceptable? It has often been a feature of art, but does that legitimize the overwhelming use of offensive scenes in films? Two young people interviewed believed that a limit to what can be accepted is necessary. Jermaine, 18, thought challenging norms was 'good, because it helps to enlighten people who don't really know a lot, but producers have to be careful about what extent they take it to because they don't want uprisings', a sentiment echoed by Omar, 18: 'I think it can be good, but depending on the outcome of it, because if it causes mass rioting and political unrest then it's not worth showing.'

It seems to be a commonly held view that provocative material should not be shown. But who determines what is seen as inflammatory and provocative? I spoke to the decision making body, the [British Board of Film Classification](#), to find out about the reasoning behind the certification process.

Mark Piper, Education Officer and Education Website Curator at the BBFC, gave me an insight into the decision to pass certain films as 18's even when they might cause offence to a significant minority. Mark said: 'when we look at explicit sex in a film, we look at the context and we have to decide, is it pornography or not? There is room for explicit sex in 18 films, but it has to be contextually justifiable. Otherwise, it steps into porn, which has its own category.'

Decisions are made on a consultative basis, reflecting public opinions gathered in research exercises. From the mixed response to *Antichrist*, however, it can be seen that society as a whole is not prepared for this type of viewing, even at certificate 18. Wesley, 18, thinks: 'It shouldn't make a difference, because those who want more conservative entertainment will simply avoid films like *Antichrist*, while those who want more violent and controversial films will simply seek that niche by looking into it themselves.' This would be true, if such extreme entertainment were limited to adults.

*Bruno* was certified at 15 and still the BBC described *Bruno* as 'pushing the boundaries further than *Borat* [its 2006 predecessor] ever did.'<sup>[1]</sup> Whether or not this is reflective of general public opinion, cinema is becoming more controversial, more all encompassing and more liberal. Nonetheless, there remain strict boundaries and limits to content. *Bruno* had to be edited in order to be shown at certificate 15.

Quoting Mark Piper: 'In reference to... explicit sex, the public [told us] that was something that didn't particularly bother them in 18 works as long as it was reserved for an adult audience. However, discrimination and racist language was not acceptable at certain categories. It's really the general public that dictates what our guidelines are and whether we become more liberal or whether we become more conservative.'

Again, the onus lies with the public to give their opinion and effect change. This not only applies to the content of films but the certifications themselves. "The age classifications are quite arbitrary in many ways" admitted Mark Piper, "but it's just traditionally that's the way it's worked." Since the introduction of the 12A in 2002, which solved issues of excluding young children from partially violent films which might have been aimed at a young audience, no changes have been made to the classification system. Apparently, as long as it continues to work well, there is no sign of public pressure to change it.

So, despite the furore caused by *Bruno* and *Antichrist* this summer, these films represent rare instances of dissatisfaction with a system that is otherwise seen as proficient. Still, there is the question of whether some things should never be shown at any age and the potential risk controversial content poses to society. The answer lies with the tide of public opinion – whether this will become more liberal or more conservative waits to be seen.

## About this article

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