



BBFC Guide to
Sexual Violence

BBFC Guide to Sexual Violence

Our research repeatedly shows that sexual violence is the area of most concern for UK audiences. The issue can encompass a wide range of unwanted sexual acts and activities, including physical contact, threats, coercion and sexually abusive behaviour.

The stronger forms of sexual violence, including rape, are not permitted at U and PG. We therefore do not feature the heading 'Sexual violence' among the listed issues for those categories in our guidelines.

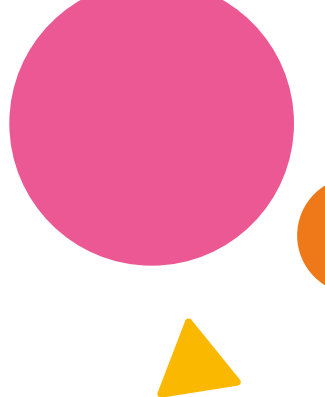
The findings from our research are clear that narratives dealing with sexual violence can have value for younger audiences if the content handles the material sensitively, clearly condemns abusive acts, and carries positive messages, such as the importance of consent in sexual scenarios. In some cases this value may enable material to be passed 12A/12 or 15, depending on the overall tone, duration and detail in a scene. Rape, for example, should only be implied at 12A/12, and any sexual threat should be brief.

References to sexual violence can be less distressing than scenes showing it, but some references may still require an 18 if they are particularly graphic or detailed.

We may intervene at 18 if the content presents realistic portrayals of sexual violence in a manner that encourages imitation or degrades a viewer's sense of empathy for others.

Child sex abuse can be discreetly referenced at 12A/12, but may be rated higher if the references are frequent or could disturb younger audiences. As with sexual violence, scenes of child sex abuse may occur at 15 and 18, provided the material is not in breach of the Protection of Children Act 1978.

To find out more, see the case studies included in this guide for examples.





Shaped By You.

Our latest guidelines consultation
involved 12,000 people.

To find out more about our age
ratings, content advice and new
Classification Guidelines go to
bbfc.co.uk/about-classification

How each age rating deals with Sexual Violence



Universal

U-rated content is suitable for audiences of all ages, although not all U-rated content is aimed at children.

Children's content should be set within a positive framework and should offer reassuring counter-balances to any violence, threat or scary scenes. Generally a U is unlikely to unsettle a four-year-old, although it is impossible to predict what might affect any particular child.

Classification decisions take into account the overall theme, including its treatment and the sensitivity of its presentation.

Certain challenging themes (for example, suicide, substance addiction, sexual violence) are unlikely to be appropriate at U and PG. In principle, however, most themes can be presented in a manner that allows classification at 18 or, where suitable, at lower categories.

Parental Guidance

General viewing, but some scenes may be unsuitable for young children

PG-rated content is suitable for general viewing. A PG should generally not unsettle a child aged around eight, although parents and caregivers should be aware that some scenes may be unsuitable for more sensitive children.

Classification decisions take into account the overall theme, including its treatment and the sensitivity of its presentation.

Certain challenging themes (for example, suicide, substance addiction, sexual violence) are unlikely to be appropriate at U and PG. In principle, however, most themes can be presented in a manner that allows classification at 18 or, where suitable, at lower categories.



12A/12

Cinema content classified 12A and video content classified 12 contain material that is not generally suitable for children aged under 12.

No one younger than 12 may be permitted to attend a 12A cinema screening unless they are accompanied by an adult. Adults planning to take a child under 12 to a 12A should consider whether the main feature is suitable for that child. To help them decide, we recommend that they check the BBFC's content advice for the film in advance. No one younger than 12 may rent or buy a 12-rated video.

There may be verbal references to sexual violence provided they are not graphic. The stronger forms of sexual violence, including rape, may only be implied and any sexual threat or abusive behaviour should be brief and negatively presented.



15

Suitable only for 15 years and over

No one younger than 15 may see 15-rated content in a cinema. No one younger than 15 may rent or buy a 15-rated video.

There may be detailed verbal references to sexual violence or abusive behaviour, but graphic descriptions of specific acts are unlikely to be acceptable. The stronger forms of sexual violence, including rape, must not be detailed or prolonged. An intense and sustained focus on sexual threat is unacceptable.



18

Suitable only for adults

No one younger than 18 may see 18-rated content in a cinema. No one younger than 18 may rent or buy an 18-rated video.

Adults should be free to choose their own entertainment. Exceptions are most likely where material or treatment appears to us to risk harm to individuals or, through their behaviour, to society. For example, the detailed portrayal of violent or dangerous acts, or of illegal drug use, which may cause harm to public health or morals.



Case studies



12A

The Color Purple

domestic abuse, sexual violence references, language, sex, discrimination

Alice Walker's seminal 1982 novel, *The Color Purple*, has been the inspiration for multiple adaptations in other media, including Steven Spielberg's 1985 film adaptation, starring Whoopi Goldberg, and a stage musical that premiered in 2004. This latest iteration adapts the stage musical to film, complete with dazzling song and dance numbers.

At its heart, though, *The Color Purple* remains an empowering story of a woman overcoming adversity. Among the challenges she faces are instances of sexual violence and abuse. Early scenes establish through undetailed verbal and visual reference that the protagonist, Celie, was assaulted by her father at an early age and bore two children who were given up for adoption. She is then sold into a loveless and abusive marriage to the cruel Mister, who attempts to rape Celie's sister, Nettie, and chases her from his property and Celie's life.

Despite its harrowing subject matter, the film is visually discreet and, unlike the source novel, does not make Celie's age explicit during her early years. The perpetrators of sexual violence and abuse are unlikable and clearly criticised for their behaviour, and the gender dynamics are framed within the historical setting of the film.

The musical genre also supported the film's classification. The songs are emotional, but many are also uplifting, defiant and empowering, preventing the tone from becoming oppressively bleak. Celie's strength and growing pride in her own identity and value means the film is ultimately an inspiring story, and we were therefore able to classify it 12A for domestic abuse, sexual violence references, language, sex, discrimination.

FILM

Classification date
07/01/2024

Director(s)
Blitz Bazawule

Genre(s)
Musical

Approx. running minutes
141m



15

Sound Of Freedom

child sex abuse theme, sexual threat, strong threat

Inspired by real events, *Sound Of Freedom* follows a former Homeland Security agent as he battles child sex traffickers. The film is tonally bleak and contains distressing scenes of children being kidnapped and trafficked, with sexual violence implied.

Filmmakers are free to explore controversial themes. The BBFC's role is to ensure the content is classified appropriately based on our guidelines, in order to protect children and other vulnerable groups from potential harm and to empower consumers to make informed viewing decisions.

Sound Of Freedom was submitted with a 12A category request from the distributor. While the film highlights the efforts of those attempting to rescue children and stop sex traffickers, the overall sombre tone, distressing scenes and disturbing subject matter presented numerous challenges to a 12A rating.

Our guidelines take into account the content's overall tone and impact. As the central theme of the film is child

sex trafficking and the emotional trauma this has on the children, their families and the authorities seeking to help them, the film presents content that could be extremely harrowing for young audiences and confound parental expectations at 12A/12. Our research has shown that 'real world' threats, especially scenarios that young people could imagine happening to them, carry more impact and distress than purely fantastical content.

The film also features scenes in which children are kidnapped, groomed and trafficked. Visual and verbal references to child sex trafficking and abuse occur throughout, as well as sequences of sexual threat and implied sexual violence directed towards children. Despite the film's visual discretion, the material could not be contained at the requested 12A and we ultimately classified it 15 for child sex abuse theme, sexual threat, strong threat.

FILM

Classification date
01/08/2023

Director(s)
Alejandro Monteverde

Genre(s)
Thriller

Approx. running minutes
131m



15

Tár

sexually abusive behaviour

From director Todd Field, *Tár* is a gripping psychological drama following an acclaimed composer and conductor whose life unravels when her history of abusive behaviour is revealed.

Tár invites the audience into the sophisticated world of Lydia Tár; an erudite, forceful and captivating figure. Although married, she is evidently attracted to a new member of her orchestra to whom she gives favourable treatment. As the narrative unfolds, we understand that this is a pattern of behaviour whereby Lydia uses her status to groom and seduce younger women, before discarding them. We also learn that one of her former targets took their own life after Lydia rejected her and sabotaged her career.

Some of the most challenging content from a classification perspective is when sexual violence or abuse is only implied. This discretion can sometimes mean the material is containable at 12A/12, especially if it is clearly condemned. In other cases, the distressing nature

of the subject matter itself can affect the classification. Although Lydia's abusive acts remain largely off-screen or are only subtly implied, their impact is felt throughout and gives the film a brooding, unsettling tone.

Our research has also shown that allowing audiences to empathise with the perpetrator of coercive, controlling or abusive behaviour can make the content inappropriate for younger audiences, especially if there is not a clear condemnation of the perpetrator's actions. Lydia is initially positioned as a compelling and even likeable protagonist, but as the full extent of her abuse emerges, our sympathy and respect for her wanes. Nevertheless, the complexity of this portrayal could confound or confuse younger viewers, for whom we would expect content to very clearly condemn sexually abusive behaviour. Participants in our latest guidelines research agreed with a 15 rating for the film.

We therefore classified *Tár* 15 for sexually abusive behaviour.



FILM

Classification date
21/11/2022

Director(s)
Todd Field

Genre(s)
Drama

Approx. running minutes
152m



18

The Last Duel

sexual violence, strong bloody violence

Set in medieval France, Ridley Scott's epic drama follows a court case in which a woman, Marguerite, brings an accusation of rape against a respected squire, Jacques LeGris. Unable to convince the prejudicial male jury of her truth, the case is decided by a duel to the death between LeGris and Marguerite's husband, the knight Jean de Carrouges.

The events leading up to the trial are presented from the perspectives of Marguerite, LeGris and de Carrouges, with each retelling displaying subtle changes in the behaviour and actions of the characters. LeGris, a man of wealth and status, regards the incident as the consensual consummation of an ongoing flirtation between himself and Marguerite. From Marguerite's point of view, however, LeGris overpowered her, dismissed her clear lack of consent, and raped her.

Our 2019 guidelines research identified a series of factors that intensify portrayals of sexual violence and indicate that an 18 rating is likely required. These include invitations for audiences to empathise with the perpetrator, a focus on the

perpetrator's pleasure or the victim being overpowered, and prolonged sexual threat prior to sexual violence. These factors are all present across LeGris and Marguerite's versions of the incident.

Another area of concern when classifying content is whether a scene of sexual violence suggests that victims enjoy rape. Following the assault, Marguerite becomes During the trial, the jury – with their limited scientific knowledge in the fourteenth century – believe that a woman cannot become pregnant unless she enjoys the sexual encounter. From a modern perspective we know this to be a false belief, but in the context of the narrative the jury uses it to challenge the legitimacy of Marguerite's testimony.

Unlike other classification issues in which a historical setting can support passing content at a lower rating, our research has shown that historical contexts have no impact on the distress of seeing scenes of sexual violence. For these reasons, we classified *The Last Duel* 18 for sexual violence, strong bloody violence.

FILM

Classification date
03/10/2021

Director(s)
Ridley Scott

Genre(s)
Action, Drama

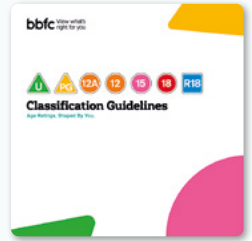
Approx. running minutes
153m

BBFC Classification Guidelines. Shaped by you.

We provide age ratings and content advice for films and other content in line with our published Classification Guidelines.

With more content more accessible than ever before, it is imperative that our age ratings and content advice provide a trusted guide that people can rely on when choosing what to watch, whether at the cinema, on DVD and Blu-ray or on Video on Demand (VoD) services.

Every four to five years, we speak to thousands of people from all over the country to explore what matters to them when it comes to classification. In our most recent guidelines research, 12,000 people took part – the highest number of participants we have ever consulted – providing us with a very robust set of findings to help ensure our standards continue to reflect the views of UK audiences. Here's what we found:



Classification Guidelines

To read the latest edition of the full BBFC Classification Guidelines, visit our website at bbfc.co.uk

87%

of parents agree with BBFC age rating decisions all or most of the time

85%

trust BBFC age ratings to indicate whether content is suitable for themselves or their family

Trust in BBFC age ratings has grown to

90%

among parents/caregivers in the last five years

97%

of people see a benefit to age ratings for some or all audiences

81%

of people want consistent age ratings across cinema, DVD and Blu-ray and Video on Demand/streaming services

99%

recognise at least one BBFC age rating symbol (78% recognise them all)

About the BBFC



The British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) is the independent film and video regulator for the UK. We are here to help everyone choose age-appropriate films, videos and websites, wherever and however they watch or use them.

We do this primarily through our widely recognised and trusted age ratings and content advice.

Every BBFC age rating decision and every piece of content advice is based on our Classification Guidelines, which we refresh every four to five years through an extensive consultation with thousands of people across the UK. This gives us an unmatched insight into what audiences find acceptable for different age groups.

The result is a transparent, well-understood and trusted classification system that gives people the best information to help them choose what to view and to protect children and vulnerable adults from harmful content.

We are not-for-profit and are funded through the fees we charge for our services.

We classify:

- films, trailers, advertisements and other content for theatrical (cinema) release on behalf of local authorities who licence cinemas under the UK's licensing legislation¹
- video works distributed on physical media under the Video Recordings Act 1984 (VRA)
- video content distributed on Video on Demand and streaming services (VoD) under a voluntary, self-regulatory service
- commercial and internet content distributed via the UK's Mobile Networks under a voluntary, self-regulatory service

As well as being based on consultation with thousands of people across the UK, our guidelines incorporate other relevant research, expert advice and our accumulated experience. The guidelines, and our practice in applying them, pay particular attention to changes in audience expectations, attitudes and concerns and to changes in the law.

Here, and throughout the guidelines, we take video content to include films, programmes and other content released on DVD and Blu-ray and on VoD services.

We take responsibility for applying the guidelines to all content submitted to us, to ensure their application and interpretation is consistent, fair and reasonable. From time to time, issues may arise that are not addressed directly in the guidelines. Where such issues occur, we will deal with them in line with the standards expressed and implied in these guidelines. The guidelines are not a legal document and should be interpreted in the spirit of what is intended as well as in the letter.

We will provide, on request, guidance on the interpretation and application of these guidelines.

¹Since 31 March 2016 the BBFC has sub-contracted the assessment of cinema advertisements for commercial goods and services to the Cinema Advertising Association, while retaining responsibility for classifying, on behalf of local authorities, films, trailers, public information films and charity campaigns, and other cinema content.

Our guiding principles

To protect children and vulnerable adults from potentially harmful content

To empower consumers, particularly parents and those with responsibility for children, to make informed viewing decisions

To enable content to reach the widest possible audience appropriate for the theme and treatment

To support the right of adults to choose their own entertainment as long as it remains within the law and is not potentially harmful

British Board of Film Classification

3 Soho Square

London

W1D 3HD

T 020 7440 1570

bbfc.co.uk/about-classification