

BBFC Guide to

Threat and Horror

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Although threat and horror are frequently interlinked, audiences see them as having distinct individual properties. Threat is when someone is in a potentially dangerous or harmful situation, including being threatened by another; while horror typically features sustained suspense and terror, supernatural forces or creatures, gory or disturbing images, or regular ‘jump scares’ and frightening moments.

For both threat and horror we consider the overall tone and impact of the content. Stories with reassuring resolutions and moments of levity may receive lower ratings than content which is pervasively bleak, tense or despairing.

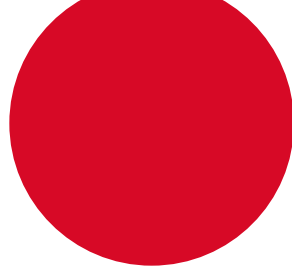
When classifying sequences of threat and horror, especially at U, PG and 12A/12, we consider the duration, frequency, intensity and context. Scenes that are brief, infrequent, broken up by comedy or are clearly fantastical are likely to receive a lower age rating than prolonged, frequent or intense scenes. Audiences also regard animation to be less impactful than live action, especially in content aimed at young audiences.

Audiences do not typically expect ‘horror’ at U or PG, but some unsettling or frightening sequences may be permitted. We signify this in content advice using the term ‘scary scenes’. From 12A/12 onwards, content advice will mention ‘horror’.

Our research has shown that young people – including those for whom the 12A/12 and 15 age groups are applicable – find instances of real world threat particularly disturbing and impactful. They note the examples of kidnapping and terrorism as issues which inspire an unnerving feeling of ‘it could happen to me’. We are therefore likely to classify sequences of real world threats more cautiously than fantastical scenes.

It is rare that threat as an individual classification issue results in an 18 age rating, unless it is clearly sadistic in nature.

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 Threat and Horror



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.

Threat and scary scenes that may unsettle young children should be very mild and the outcome should be reassuring.

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.

Threat and scary scenes should not be prolonged or intense.



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 scenes of moderate physical and psychological threat. Although some scenes may be disturbing, the overall tone should not be. Horror sequences should not be frequent or sustained.



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 strong threat and horror. A sustained focus on sadistic threat is unlikely to be acceptable.



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



PG

Puss In Boots: The Last Wish

**mild violence, threat, scary scenes,
language, rude humour**

Continuing the adventures of the sword-wielding feline first introduced in *Shrek 2*, *Puss In Boots: The Last Wish* finds our hero embarking on a quest to track down a magical wishing star when he realises he only has one of his nine lives left.

Faced with his own mortality, Puss's fear of dying is represented by a large scary wolf, Death, who wields two sickles and stalks him throughout the film. When Death appears, Puss experiences anxiety attacks: his heart races, his hair sticks up, and he sees his life flashing before his eyes.

Although set in a fantastical fairy tale world, these moments of threat may be too unsettling for very young children at U. In previous films, Puss is rarely troubled by the situations he finds himself in, but here we see him

scared and distressed. Children who empathise with Puss may feel his fear, and the thematic material around dying could also be unnerving and upsetting. However, the scary scenes are not prolonged or intense, and there is humour, colourful animation and action throughout, which outweighs the brief frightening moments and jump scares.

Throughout his quest, Puss is supported and encouraged by his friends, and the issues of mental health and anxiety are handled sensitively in a way that could have value for young audiences. Puss ultimately learns the value of life and the adventure ends positively. *Puss In Boots: The Last Wish* was therefore classified PG for mild violence, threat, scary scenes, language, rude humour.

FILM

Classification date
30/11/2022

Director(s)

Joel Crawford,
Januel Mercado

Genre(s)

Adventure, Animation,
Fantasy

Approx. running minutes

98m



12A



Doctor Strange In The Multiverse Of Madness

moderate horror, violence, threat, injury detail

Director Sam Raimi draws on his experience helming superhero films and his roots in the horror genre to bring a nightmarish twist to the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) with *Doctor Strange In The Multiverse Of Madness*. In this instalment, the eponymous doctor must traverse different universes to evade Scarlet Witch, who seeks to unlock a powerful source of dark magic.

Departing from previous MCU films, *Doctor Strange In The Multiverse Of Madness* features some notable moments of horror, including supernatural zombie-like creatures, jump scares, and demonic entities. The action largely takes place in alternate dimensions and universes, some of which resemble surreal dreamscapes in which the laws of our world do not apply. While fantastical settings and creatures are familiar to Marvel fans, the horror elements of this adventure may surprise or scare younger audiences.

Our research has shown that people see a distinction between 'threat' and 'horror'. Physical and psychological threats can occur at 12A/12, but horror content should not be frequent or sustained. The horror sequences in *Doctor Strange In The Multiverse Of Madness* are occasional but not frequent, and occur within a clearly fantasy context. They are regularly broken up by action, humour and spectacle and the overall tone of the film is not disturbing. Even a scene in which a decomposing corpse is magically reanimated contains moments of comedy and reassurance as our hero possesses it, rather than it terrorising people.

We classified *Doctor Strange In The Multiverse Of Madness* 12A for moderate horror, violence, threat, injury detail, and produced a 'What You Need To Know' resource on our website to make people aware that the film was scarier than other films in the MCU.

FILM

Classification date
14/10/2016

Director(s)
Sam Raimi

Genre(s)
Adventure, Fantasy, Horror

Approx. running minutes
121m



15

Scary Stories To Tell In The Dark

scenes of sustained horror

Scary Stories To Tell In The Dark follows a group of teenagers who inadvertently release a vengeful spirit after taking a story book from a haunted house in this US horror film, based on the short story collections from Alvin Schwartz.

Horror content often involves groups of teens being terrorised by supernatural entities. There are similar elements in *Scary Stories To Tell In The Dark*, but despite the source material having appeal to young teens, our research has shown that an emphasis on intense and prolonged scary scenes in films and series can be too impactful for young audiences at 12A/12.

For example, in one sequence, a teenager is menaced and attacked by a scarecrow which has come to life. In others, teens are pursued by a zombie-like creature and spiders burst from a bite on a girl's body.

At 12A/12 there is room for some horror content as long as it is not frequent or sustained. *Scary Stories To Tell In The Dark's* horror is pervasive and prolonged. Despite being lighter than many horror films at 15 and containing elements of humour, these moments do not provide sufficient relief from the scary sequences to allow the film at a lower age rating.

We tested the film in our latest guidelines research, where we found that participants supported the established 15 rating, ultimately feeling that the horror was too intense to be rated 12A/12 and could scare and disturb young audiences. The prolonged focus on victims' fear gives the film an intensity that led us to classify the film 15 for scenes of sustained horror.



FILM

Classification date

23/07/2019

Director(s)

André Øvredal

Genre(s)

Horror

Approx. running minutes

103m



15

The Batman

strong threat, violence

The Batman is a crime thriller in which the caped crusader investigates a series of murders in which the killer's twisted games and intricate clues allude to conspiracy and corruption.

Batman is a character that has often presented classification challenges for the BBFC. For example, 1992's *Batman Returns* was originally rated 15, but has since been reclassified 12A/12 as our standards have evolved; while in 2008, *The Dark Knight's* 12A rating led to it becoming one of the most complained about films in our history.

In 2022, Matt Reeves' *The Batman* was submitted with a 12A request. Although visually restrained, showing very little blood or gore, the film contains scenes of terrorism, kidnapping and violence which are more realistic and menacing than previous Batman films. The antagonist, the Riddler, creates elaborate, sadistic traps that evoke films such as *Saw* and *Se7en*, dwelling on the victim's fear and distress. In one example, a man is

kidnapped and forced into a public place with an explosive device locked around his neck, and in another a man's head is trapped in a cage into which rats are led.

Scenes of violence and threat in superhero films are often distanced from reality, taking place in a fantastical setting or involving characters with superhuman abilities. *The Batman*, however, portrays a realistic vision of Gotham City and its dangers. Our research has shown that threat in realistic contexts is often more distressing for young audiences than fantasy, with young people citing kidnapping and terrorism as examples of anxiety-inducing real world scenarios.

Under our guidelines at 12A, whilst some scenes may be disturbing, the overall tone should not be. *The Batman's* brooding, bleak tone is pervasive throughout, with little relief or humour to counterbalance its unsettling scenes of torture, murder and corruption. We therefore classified it 15 for strong threat, violence.

FILM

Classification date
07/02/2022

Director(s)
Matt Reeves

Genre(s)
Fantasy

Approx. running minutes
176m

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

97%

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

Trust in BBFC age ratings has grown to

90%

among parents/caregivers in the last five years

85%

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

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

