

## **CENSORSHIP MILESTONES**

Milestones in UK censorship history, from the very beginning to the present day

### **1896**

First public film screening in Britain when the Lumière Cinematograph is demonstrated at the Regent Street Polytechnic in London.

### **1909**

The Cinematograph Act is passed by Parliament in response to fears about public safety due to the fire hazard from highly flammable early film. It requires all cinema premises to be licensed by the local authority and forms the basis for subsequent film censorship in Britain.

### **1913**

The British Board of Film Censors (BBFC) is established by the film industry, with the promise that "No film will be passed that is not clean and wholesome and absolutely above suspicion". Films are given either 'U' (for universal exhibition) or 'A' (more suitable for adults) certificates. The BBFC has no legal powers to censor films, but its advice is generally followed by local authorities, which have the power to withdraw cinema licences. This is still the case today.

Videos of course are another matter.

**1917** In response to a growing lobby in favour of state censorship, new BBFC president T.P. O'Connor, a Liberal MP, publishes "O'Connor's 43" — a list of the grounds on which films might be cut for the guidance of film examiners. These provide the basis for BBFC policy until World War II.

### **1926**

Eisenstein's **Battleship Potemkin** is banned under O'Connor's 43 which prohibits "Bolshevik propaganda" and "incitement to class hatred".

### **1930**

Marlene Dietrich becomes the first woman to kiss another on screen, in **Morocco**.

### **1933**

The board objects to a record 504 of the 1,713 films submitted to it. Within a few years the film industry has got the message. By the end of the 1930s only a handful of films are refused certificates each year. This is in large part due to tough new regulations in Hollywood, and which crushed the early freedom of the film industry (the so-called Hays Code – named after the head of the Senate-appointed Committee whose relentless sense moral outrage was brought to bear on every film made – with powers to intercede even at script stage). Even so, in 1933 the BBFC still felt it necessary to introduce the 'H' classification for Hollywood horror movies, indicating that such films are unsuitable for children under 13 years of age.

### **1937**

The Cinematograph Films (Animals) Act prohibits films involving the mistreatment of animals. This Law has never been re-written and so technically does not apply to television, video or the internet.

### 1939

The outbreak of war sees responsibility for film censorship shared between the BBFC and the Ministry of Information. Pre-war rules are actually relaxed rather than tightened – for the boosting of morale presumably. The go-ahead is given to anti-Nazi films such as **Pastor Hall** which had been rejected before the war under rules banning films that might "wound the susceptibilities of foreign peoples". Also approved is **Love on the Dole**, formerly rejected as "sordid".

### 1948

**No Orchids for Miss Blandish** is passed by the BBFC but its violent content (tame by today's standards) prompts widespread criticism. BBFC secretary Arthur Watkins Harris formulates three principles on which the board should judge films:

1. Is the story, incident or dialogue likely to impair the moral standards of the public by extenuating vice or crime or depreciating moral standards?
2. Is it likely to give offence to reasonably minded cinema audiences?
3. What effect would it have on children?

### 1951

The 'X' certificate replaces the pre-war 'H', and allows a new generation of films to deal with 'adult' themes. Even so, in 1954, Marlon Brando's **The Wild One** is banned. Like the 'H' certificate, the 'X' imposes a minimum entry age of 16.

### 1955

**The Garden of Eden** is the first of a rash of British films that attempted to get round the restrictions on nudity by purporting to be documentary features about naturism. Although it was refused a certificate, a number of local authorities allow it to be shown. From then on, the BBFC relaxes its rules to permit 'discreet' nudity.

### 1959

Under new BBFC secretary John Trevelyan, **Room at the Top**, **Saturday Night and Sunday Morning** are passed, ushering in an era of British film-making with a frank treatment of sex begin to push back the boundaries of what is permitted on screen.

### 1965

The BBC bans the television broadcast of **The War Game** because of its depiction of the after-effects of a nuclear holocaust, including the shooting of civilians.

### 1967

Local licensing authorities allow the screening of Joseph Strick's **Ulysses**, in which the word "fuck" is spoken for the first time on British cinema screens.

**1969** Ken Russell's **Women in Love** features a nude wrestling scene with Alan Bates and Oliver Reed, in which male genitals could be seen. The sequence is blurred at the insistence of the censors.

### 1970

A prosecution for obscenity of Andy Warhol's **Flesh** is dropped; the film is subsequently passed by the BBFC, becoming the first in Britain to show an erection.

### 1970

The 'X' certificate is changed, restricting such films to audiences aged 18 and over

### **1973**

Stanley Kubrick withdraws his film **A Clockwork Orange** from British distribution, apparently after his family received death threats.

### **1975**

**The Texas Chainsaw Massacre** is granted an 'X' certificate by the Greater London Council, despite being rejected by the BBFC. It has only recently been granted a video certificate, and indeed a broadcast on FilmFour Channel and Channel Four.

### **1976**

Pasolini's **Saló**, an art house film based on de Sade's 120 Days of Sodom, but relocated to Mussolini's Italy is refused a certificate. A much shortened version was then passed for exhibition in club conditions, but was nevertheless seized by Police.

**1976** Secretary James Ferman reports that 58 of the 402 films seen by the BBFC during the previous year included an explicit rape scene.

### **1977**

The new Criminal Law Act extends the Obscene Publications Act 1959 to cover film. This allows for the context and artistic merit of a film to be taken into account in determining whether or not it is obscene.

### **1978**

The Protection of Children Act makes it illegal to show indecent images of children in films, regardless of context.

### **1982**

The current BBFC classification categories of 'U', 'PG', '15', '18' and 'R18' are introduced. The additional category '12' would be introduced in 1989. The law is tightened to prevent instant membership being offered by bogus 'cinema clubs', which are exempt from the normal film classification system, but not from a prosecution for obscenity.

### **1984**

After a very vocal media campaign, the Video Recordings Act 1984 gives the BBFC responsibility for classifying, cutting and sometimes banning videos. Moreover, the release of any video not classified becomes a criminal offence.

### **1985**

The BBFC drops the word 'Censors' from its title, becoming the British Board of Film Classification.

### **1989**

The BBFC refuses a video certificate for Nigel Wingrove's **Visions of Ecstasy**, the first time it has ever done so on the grounds of blasphemy.

### **1993**

The killing in Liverpool of two-year-old Jamie Bulger by a pair of young boys prompts a fresh national outcry over 'video nasties'. The new Criminal Justice Act amends the Video Recordings Act 1984, requiring the BBFC to pay special attention to video representations of violence, horror, criminal behaviour, sex and drugs

## 1994

The Criminal Justice and Public Order Act increases the penalties for breach of the VRA.

## 1996

With the passing of the Broadcasting Act 1996 the Broadcasting Standards Commission is created to act as the statutory body with responsibility for standards and fairness in broadcasting. Its Programme Code covers all television and radio, as well as text, cable, satellite and digital services provided by the BBC and commercial broadcasters.

## 1997

An experiment whereby the BBFC relaxed restrictions on the content of R18-rated videos results in confusion as erotic films passed by the BBFC are seized because thought to be obscene by HM Customs & Excise. The experiment is ended on the instructions of new Home Secretary Jack Straw.

## 1998

Andreas Whittam Smith, former editor of the Independent, takes over as president of the BBFC. One of his first decisions is to pass the remake of **Lolita** uncut for general distribution. In the same year, Britain becomes the only country in the world to insist on cuts to the new James Bond movie **Tomorrow Never Dies** because of its violence.

## 1999

**A Clockwork Orange** is given a certificate for video release without cuts after the death of its director Stanley Kubrick. **Fight Club** is granted an 18 certificate, but controversially with cuts. The BBFC state that "the violence was excessively sustained and in conflict with the concern expressed in the BBFC Guidelines about taking pleasure in pain or sadism". **Romance** is passed without cuts for cinema release, despite explicit sexual scenes. Later in the year it is passed for video release with a 1 second cut to delete sight of an ejaculation. **Straw Dogs** is in effect refused a certification for video after distributors failed to offer to cut the film. Once banned films **The Texas Chainsaw Massacre** and **Driller Killer** are passed for video, the latter with cuts. **The Exorcist** is also passed for video, without cuts. **A Cat in the Brain**, a "video nasty", is again rejected for its mixing of sex and violence. Two European films containing explicit sexual images are passed, **The Idiots** without cuts, but **Seul Contre Tous** with the images blurred. The BBFC state that "they were nevertheless of a particularly extreme nature which exceeded the boundaries of acceptability for BBFC classification in any medium. Their extended duration also placed them in breach of the requirement set out in the Board's published guidelines for '18' classification which require that "Images of real sex must be brief and justified by context".

## 2000

**Ai No Corrida** is passed without cuts for video release, although one shot has been doctored prior to classification, in line with the earlier cinema release version. **Last House on the Left** is again refused a classification for cinema exhibition, due "the explicit and sadistic sexual violence contained in the film".

**14<sup>th</sup> September 2000** - The BBFC launch new guidelines outlining how film and video will be classified from now on. This complements the revision of the R18