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Key skills communication Level 4 - Film Censorship

Tuesday 15 June 2004

Source Booklet

- This booklet contains source material for the level 4 communication test, June 2004
 - The test questions will be based on this material
 - You must hand in this source booklet at the end of the test, along with your question paper and answer booklet
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The level 4 communication test will assess your ability to:

- evaluate and synthesise information from different sources
- communicate relevant information with accuracy, effectively using a form, structure and style that suits your purpose
- organise and clearly present relevant information, illustrating what you say in ways that suit your purpose, subject and audience
- vary your use of vocabulary and grammatical expression to convey particular effects, enable fine distinctions to be made, achieve emphasis and engage the audience

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Explained: Film censorship in the UK

Recent BBFC Rulings:

BATTLEFIELD EARTH required cuts to a headbutt in both the feature and the trailer before it could be given a '12' certificate.

AMERICAN PSYCHO contained strong depictions of sex, violence and drug use but was classified uncut as '18'.

CHERRY FALLS a high school horror film was rated '15' for cinema release due to violence, horror, strong language and sexual references. For video release it was classified '18' due to greater risk of underage viewing.

Disney's **DINOSAUR** was refused a 'U' certificate as it was felt the intensity of some strong scenes and the threat of horror might frighten some children. The film was given a 'PG' rating.

Who controls film censorship in the UK?

In theory, local councils – borough and county councils for the most part – have the power to allow any cinema to show any film. In practice, the councils almost always follow the classifications given to films by the British Board of Film Classification (formerly the British Board of Film Censorship).

What is the BBFC?

The BBFC is technically an autonomous industry body, which charges film distributors for the service it provides in classifying films.

It was set up in 1912 by the film industry as a self-regulatory body in an attempt to head off government interference. With a few exceptions, local councils gradually accepted its classifications as standard, establishing the BBFC as the UK's semi-official censor.

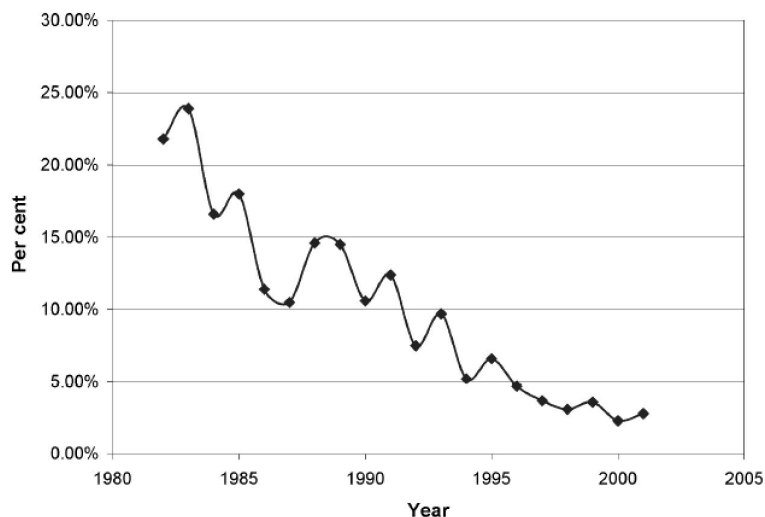
Since then, its relationship with government has been based largely on a gentlemen's understanding: the BBFC keeps its classifications within bounds deemed acceptable to the government of the day (with a close eye on public opinion). In return, Parliament makes no move to set up an official body.

In 1984, Parliament made the BBFC the body responsible for video classification in Britain. This has brought the gentlemen's agreement within the law. It gave the BBFC official status at last, but has also left it more vulnerable to persuasion from central government.

How does the BBFC make its decisions? When does it cut films?

The board operates to a set of guidelines published on its website. It has traditionally observed a distinction between what it calls "manners" – flexible attitudes on the part of the public towards things such as nudity and obscene language – and "morals" – immutable codes of conduct. This conveniently allows it to change its classifications if it judges that public attitudes have changed.

Percentage of Films Cut by the BBFC



The board cuts films surprisingly rarely, and very openly: its website lists the length of any cut, and the reasons for it. Most cuts are made at the request of the distributor, to squeeze films into a lower age classification (generally speaking, lower age classifications mean increased takings at the box office). Films classified 18 are rarely cut, and generally only to avoid prosecution under the Obscene Publications Act.

Who runs the BBFC?

In theory, it runs itself as a business. In practice, it is very susceptible to influence from government departments, partly through its fear of being made redundant by the creation of an official body. The clearest example of this is the nomination of its president. Since the authority to classify films for video release is granted to the president of the BBFC as a person, the board's continued survival would be in doubt if it failed to appoint someone with Home Office approval.

Since June 2001, responsibility for film and video classification has moved from the Home Office to the Department of Culture, Media and Sport. In part, this is because the DCMS is working on bringing regulation of broadcast media, film and video under the aegis of a single body, Ofcom.

What would this mean for film censorship?

The effect of having film censorship run directly by a government agency raises obvious concerns. Critics of the proposal predict many more knee-jerk responses to causes celebres, and less consistency over time as new governments are sworn in, bringing their own attitudes with them.

Source: Sean Clarke, Guardian Unlimited website, Wednesday 13 March 2002

Sunday Times Editorial of 17th March 1996, by Andrew Neil

This editorial appeared just after the Dunblane Massacre, when Thomas Hamilton shot 16 pupils and their teacher dead.

I went to see a film called *Heat* at my local cinema on Thursday night because it had been eagerly recommended by several friends. It is a homage to violence. Almost every scene is dominated by guns – lots of them, and very big ones. All problems are resolved by their use. The criminals have military assault rifles, the police are dressed like soldiers in combat gear.

The air is thick with the sound of bullets tearing through flesh and bones; blood and brains spurt everywhere. The criminal whose band of robbers shoot half the Los Angeles force is made out to be a man to admire as much as the detective chasing him. They shake hands at the end. Where is the moral message in that?

Heat is typical of films on offer in cinemas up and down the land. The best creative brains in Hollywood – *Heat* stars Al Pacino and Robert De Niro – churn out such big budget garbage every week. They espouse a culture of violence in which life is cheap and disposable, with random, casual murder the order of the day and victory going to whoever has the biggest gun. It is a world in which civility, rational discourse and the peaceful resolution of differences have no place.

I do not argue that *Heat* and films like it inevitably lead to Dunblane. There is no evidence that Thomas Hamilton supped on video nasties then went off to kill 16 children and their teacher. The jury is still out on any direct link between screen violence and real violence.

However, far too much of what passes for popular entertainment pollutes our society and creates a new tolerance in which what was thought to be

beyond the pale becomes acceptable. Young minds are particularly vulnerable. It has been calculated that the average American child sees 8000 killings and 10000 other acts of violence on films and television by the age of 12. It is an appalling video kindergarten in which to rear our children; those who say it has no detrimental effect whatsoever on them have more faith in the human ability to be untainted by evil than I.

Repeated exposure to screen violence, which is escalating in brutality with every new batch of films released, creates a climate in which violence is validated and in which the real consequences of violence are desensitised. It demeans us all by devaluing life; more seriously, it risks destabilizing those already tottering on instability.

The violence on British television is less graphic than in the cinema though the Hollywood ‘splatter movies’ shown at night on satellite television are a disgrace that no self-respecting adults should watch, much less let their children near. But there is a new coarseness about British television that sneers at standards and revels in slovenly speech and yob behaviour. It contributes to the brutalisation of a society in which headmasters are stabbed to death at school gates and old women are tortured and killed in their homes for the small change in their purse.

The power of the media to debase would be less if the forces for good in our society were stronger. But the media have been spewing out their poison at a time when the traditional institutions and values of society, notably the nuclear family, have been disintegrating.

Source: *Sunday Times* editorial, 17 March 1996

HORROR: on the edge of taste

Like its literary antecedents, horror cinema has always focused in upon the fluctuating boundaries of taboo. It is, by its very nature, a genre of film-making which relies upon transgression. It demands that the audience's sensibilities be affronted, that decency be damned (albeit temporarily), that rules be broken.

To the censor, horror cinema presents an insurmountable problem: how to make acceptable a brand of film-making which, at its very best, strives to be thoroughly unacceptable? Their answer, to the eternal detriment of the genre, has been clumsily to neutralise and anaesthetise cutting-edge horror movies, blunting their very point and (more often than not) stripping them of whatever radical power they once possessed. For those few movies whose power remains undiminished by the piece-meal hatcheting of key scenes, outright bans are enforced as a last resort. Ironically, to the censor, the more inventive and effective a hard-core horror movie, the more likely it is to be butchered and banned. Only anodyne or unchallenging mainstream fodder can expect to be whisked through the censors' hands intact.

To highlight this problem, let us turn our attention toward the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC), a body that exemplifies the fundamental inability of censors to deal with horror cinema. A small and relatively conservative island, Britain has for many years been sheltered from the more excessive traits of European and American cinema by the BBFC, which classified and cut (or rejected outright) films submitted for public exhibition.

A number of taboo-breaking horror classics whose artistic integrity has proved unbreachable by the censors' scissors have simply been banned outright in the UK. In the mid-1970s Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and Wes Craven's *Last House on The Left* (both of which are now widely regarded as milestones in the development of horror cinema) were banned in their entirety after cuts failed to diminish their power.

The BBFC's treatment of *The Evil Dead* (cuts, an outright ban, then released with further cuts) pinpoints their inability to respond intelligently (or even consistently) to material whose very purpose is to shock.

In 1993, the BBFC sponsored a Policy Studies Institute survey comparing the viewing habits of young offenders with those of random non-offenders. It found no evidence to support allegations of the corruption by video of minors.

Director Sam Raimi reacted with weary resignation to the BBFC's massacring of his acclaimed debut feature. "The real problem is not *The Evil Dead*," he sighs, "the problem is that once the people allow the censors to determine what's right and wrong for them, once they've given them that power, who's to say that a politically disturbing film... shouldn't be censored? The people of Britain shouldn't allow them that power, because they'll soon find out that other rights are being taken from them one by one, until they have no right to speak out at all."

Source: Edited version of an article by Mark Kermode, from *Index on Censorship* 6, 1995

Suffer the Little Children

REPRESENTING children to be the objects of its care and protection is simply the most respectable way that the law has yet found to sanitise a kind of censorship that would be thought oppressive, odious and downright ridiculous if its advocates came straight out with the admission that the real targets of their attention were adults.

The dominant themes of social control down the ages have been deterrence, retribution and repression. All three motives have lately been enshrined in film censorship laws inspired by violent events, or pseudo-events, intended to restrict the free dissemination of the visual image. All three have had their progress on to the statute books eased by the occurrence, and sometimes the deliberate creation, of moral panics. Invariably, these centre on children. Sadly and crucially, the sense of outrage that recently facilitated a sizeable and unwarranted extension of censorship powers was provoked not by adults, but by the violence done by children themselves.

The James Bulger case rightly shocked the nation, indeed the world. James, a Merseyside child just a month short of his third birthday, was enticed away from his mother in a crowded shopping mall in Bootle, a town in the north-west of England, one February afternoon in 1993, dragged by his abductors, two boys aged ten, to a lonely stretch of railway line and there tortured, mutilated and stoned to death.

The effect of the media barrage following the Bulger murder did create a kind of panic. Parents feared their children were somehow at risk from other demon children and from something even worse because more numerous, insidious and seductive – namely, films and videos.

Over 100 MPs had already signed a motion supporting an amendment to the Criminal Justice and Public Order Bill. Most sections of the Bill were resisted by the Opposition. One was signally supported. Concocted by a backbencher, David Alton of the Liberal Democrats, its target was violent films and videos.

A few weeks before the Alton amendment was due to be debated, a piece of pseudo-evidence to support it came out of the academic backwoods. This one was compiled by Professor Elizabeth Newsom, head of the child development department at Nottingham University, and carried the endorsements of twenty-five doctors and academics. Called 'Video Violence and the Protection of Children'... it forged the familiar link between screen violence and child delinquency. Support for such a link – one that was not proven, still isn't, and likely never will be – again came from the very sections of the media that should have given it the coolest examination. The Independent's editorial concluded that 'the report lends weight to suggestions that brutal attacks, of the kind inflicted on James Bulger last year, can be traced to the viewing of violent videos by young children'. Of course, it lent no such weight at all to what was anyway the speculative ruling of an imaginative judge; and it soon emerged that the 'report' itself was simply 'the prof's own work'.

No one had commissioned it, at least no independent (with a lower-case 'i') authority had done so. Professor Newsom, genuinely worried in her own mind by screen violence, had put her thoughts down on paper, then circulated them, rather in the manner of a 'round robin', to academic colleagues. These were experts in their fields. But their fields were not those of violent films and videos. One was an authority on the Byzantine papacy! According to Dr Guy Cumberbatch, senior lecturer in applied psychology at Aston University, there was 'not a name [in the report] who has done research into the effects of the media, or is from the media industry. What do they know about film?'

The belief that 'unsuitable' videos may harm immature children – a belief now punitively enforced by the Alton amendment – has to be measured against recorded instances of it. There exists no reliable evidence, so far.

The most stringent film and video censorship laws in Europe have been given a boost by the most irrational means and for the most questionable motives.

Source: By Alexander Walker. Edited version of an article which appeared in *Screen Violence*, ed. Karl French, 1996

“The Banning of Boy Meets Girl” **by Tom Dewe Matthews**

CONTRARY to popular belief, not many violent films are officially banned in Britain. What actually happens when newspapers demand a celluloid sacrifice is that a film’s release into the cinema or on to video is quietly postponed by the censor. Such was the case with *Reservoir Dogs*, *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*, *Natural Born Killers* and *The Bad Lieutenant*.

Occasionally, when a film’s absence is noted by curious commentators an explanation is sought from the censor. More often, though, any delay will be imposed without much commotion by common consent between film distributors and the British Board of Film Classification. Such public indifference to a film’s whereabouts can partly be explained by the film industry and film censor’s mutual dependency on secrecy. For any exposure of this partnership would – and occasionally does – bring down opprobrium and ridicule upon both censor and censored. The power of such a vetting system can therefore be measured by its current ability to withstand examination, and for that reason the censorship of British cinema still remains covert. Today, although it is possible to find out if a film has been censored in Britain, the BBFC is not obliged to reveal what has been cut and, even more importantly, why.

In September 1995 Ray Brady’s *Boy Meets Girl* was officially refused a video certificate by the BBFC. Along with his rejection slip, the third-year film student also received a two-page letter from the head censor detailing the reasons for the film’s refusal. This note not only provides a unique insight into the normally secretive workings of the BBFC, but, because the Board is a government delegated body, the document also stands as a declaration of the state’s attitude towards screen violence in Britain.

‘As you know,’ Ferman wrote, ‘the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 laid down an additional test...’ That test used to be ‘the likelihood of a video work being viewed in the home’. But from now on, according to Ferman, it would also contain the clause ‘the likelihood of underage viewers’ coming into contact with a ‘potentially harmful’ video. Such an all-encompassing bill has made criminals of many parents. But more practically, it has, in the name of children, given the BBFC the power to censor adults. ‘The black comedy tone,’ he noted, ‘prevents our empathising with the characters or identifying with their human failings; but nor is there that compensating sense of dread at the realisation of our own vulnerability which the best horror films provide.’

Black comedy has been a particular bugbear of the British Board of Film Classification ever since the genre cropped up in movies some thirty years ago. The moral ambiguity of black humour, and the way in which it allows an audience to laugh at a victim’s predicament, has always confused the censor... Brady’s lack of moral closure, his lack of differentiation in his treatment of ‘good guys’ and ‘bad guys’ contravenes one of the BBFC’s oldest unspoken rules... the belief that films should entertain rather than provoke questions is still confirmed by British censors.

In spite of endless debate, any proof that violent behaviour can be triggered by the screen has yet to be discovered by psychologists, social researchers or censors. James Ferman himself, who has not been tardy in his search for decisive proof,

admitted in a national newspaper interview that 'Social science is an inexact discipline and human behaviour is too multi-factorial. It's nature, nurture; it's what happened to us this morning; it's how much we've had to drink.'

The belief that 'a minority' of any screen audience is incapable of making an ethical choice is the bedrock upon which Britain's film censorship exists. The BBFC only has to suggest – and not even necessarily on paper – that a film contains the sort of violence that could, in the words of Margaret Ford, the deputy director of the Board, 'be imitated by those with eggshell skulls' for it to be either officially rejected or for its release on either film and/or video to be 'postponed'.

For the banning of *Boy Meets Girl* is, in fact, a message to other independent young film-makers who depend upon the British market. The message is, don't make a film in which the audience can identify with the killer as well as his victim. Also don't make a film in which the audience is acted upon by being forced to acknowledge its role in the fulfilment of a wish it barely knew it had: that it can be both victimiser and victim. In short, don't implicate the audience in its desire for violence and ask, 'Why are you watching this?' Because, if you do, your film will fall outside the state's sanction. Or, as James Ferman puts it at the end of his letter to Ray Brady, 'On those grounds, your video certificate is refused.'

Source: extract from "The Banning of *Boy Meets Girl*" by Tom Dewe Matthews, *Screen Violence*, 1996