

New film guidelines

A survey of 3000 people conducted by the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) revealed that even for films rated 18, cinema audiences were more offended by scenes of drug use than sex and violence.

But they did think that these days it is more acceptable for younger people to see scenes of cannabis smoking.

The survey, 'Sense and Sensibilities' was undertaken to assist the BBFC in the redrafting of their ratings guidelines. The sample comprised 1249 people randomly interviewed in the street and a further 1827 people who responded to a questionnaire.

Just over half the sample agreed 'films should be allowed to portray drug use in a realistic manner.' But, nearly half thought the guidelines were not strict enough, particularly at the '12' rating and that more differentiation needed to be made between hard and soft drugs.

Drugs offend

There was concern that the guidelines were not strict enough even at the levels of '15' and '18' and overall, 'the portrayal of drug use was considered more offensive than other classification issues (sex, violence, language, nudity and blasphemy).'

As well as causing the most offence across all the age categories, drug use provoked the most polarised response in the interviewed sample. Among this group for the '18' category, 35 per cent declared drug use 'not offensive' while 29 per cent was 'strongly' offended.

The survey did not distinguish between different types of drugs or different modes of use – failure to distinguish between different drugs in the guidelines themselves was criticised by respondents.

Shoot out
yes,
shoot up
no

ents. Despite lack of differentiation, the comments of those interviewed quoted in the report indicate that it is primarily the depiction of injecting drug use that respondents found most offensive as seen in films like *Trainspotting* and *Pulp Fiction*.

As part of the consultation process, the BBFC also invited a group of professionals from the drugs field (including this writer) to consider the issues.

The discussion was very wide-ranging, but a strong theme running through the debate was that, without becoming unnecessarily permissive, honest portrayals of drug use do reflect the reality of contemporary Britain, and at the younger age ranges can help foster dialogue between young people and parents.



This picked up on research conducted recently for the Broadcasting Standards Authority, which concluded that portrayals of drug use lacked credibility.

Irrational

But however irrational, fear of illegal drug use (as opposed to drug use *per se*) runs deep in society, causing it to be lumped in with some of the most extreme human behaviour when it comes to film censorship.

The BBFC have a category called 'Rejects', films which if they 'cannot be redeemed by

cuts' will be rejected altogether. Into this category come explicit depictions of rape, torture, sadistic violence, necrophilia, bestiality and (with no further qualification) drug use.

An example of a drug film which never received a UK certificate is *The Trip*, made in 1967. It stars Peter Fonda who embarks on an LSD experience and appears the better for it at the end, despite the trip turning nightmarish. The professional group believed it was 'unhelpful' to put drug use in this category with other types of film that (to this group anyway) were clearly

Category	Previous Guidelines	New Guidelines
U	No references to drugs or drug use	No references to illegal drugs or drug use
PG	Discreet verbal or visual references to drugs only. Nothing should condone or encourage drug use	No references to illegal drugs or drug use unless entirely innocuous
12	Brief and occasional references, and images of, drug-taking are allowed. Nothing should condone or encourage drug use	Brief and occasional references to, and sight of, 'soft' drug-taking (eg cannabis) are allowed, but must be justified by context and should indicate the dangers. No instructional elements are permitted
15	Drug taking may be shown, but clear instructive detail is unacceptable. The film as a whole must not condone or encourage drug use	Unchanged
18	As for 15. Exceptions may be made where they can be justified in the public interest or where there are strong considerations of context.	'The Board may... cut or reject the following content... instructive detail of illegal drug use'
Rejects	'Drug use'	'Illegal or instructive drug use'