

“Violence? No thanks. Sex, on the other hand ...”

Sexual morals and evaluation criteria – an international comparison

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At the International Classifiers Conference (ICC) in Stockholm in October 2017, the central topic was the way depictions of sexuality are dealt with. Prior to the conference itself, participating organisations from 23 countries took part in a survey designed to provide some indication of the criteria employed in classifying sexual content in each country and to what end: is nudity an issue, or sexual acts or sexual orientation? Sexualised language, or sex in conjunction with violence? This article presents a few themes from the conference and some results from the study.¹

Sweden is legendary for its sexual permissiveness. In the 1950s, the “Swedish sin” became world-famous in the wake of innocent naked swimming scenes (e.g. in Ingmar Bergman’s [Summer with Monika](#), 1953).² Before long, Sweden was perceived as a hotbed of cinematic aphrodisiacs. A scene featuring a woman masturbating under her clothing (in Bergman’s [The Silence](#), 1963) was considered outrageously permissive in Germany, where the film was seen as a “sex shocker”.³ In a TV interview in 1969 future Swedish Prime Minister Olof Palme stunned British journalist David Frost with his revelations about his country’s preference for sexual liberality. In terms of censorship, he explained, there were relatively few restrictions: the production and distribution of certain types of films and pictures was permitted in Sweden, and, as a result, attitudes to sexuality among the country’s young people were natural and normal.⁴ In itself, declared film and literature professor Mariah Larsson at the conference while presenting a 100-year review of the history of Swedish censorship, sexuality was not and is not considered a threat to personal development in Sweden.

This changes when violence is involved. “Strict on violence, liberal on sex” is how the Swedish youth media protection paradigm was summed up in 1998 by the then associate director of the state board of censors.⁵ In 1964 Bergman pupil Vilgot Sjöman’s social drama [491](#) became the first film to be banned since the introduction of film censorship in 1911. Admittedly, His Royal Highness Gustav VI Adolf reversed the decree, but even in Sweden, Sjöman’s film – which, rather fittingly, depicted the failure of a liberal experiment – could only be shown in cinemas with 84 seconds cut out. Scenes combining violence and sexuality – a rape and a scene implying coerced sodomy with a sheepdog – had to be removed, even though they were in no way extreme or autotelic – especially when seen from a present-day perspective – but rather indicators of bleak circumstances, in the face of which the welfare state’s sanctimonious double standards were simply inadequate.

Until the abolition of film censorship in 2011 bans were imposed on other films considered “coarsening” or “brutalising”. Indeed, said Larsson, early censorship practice in particular shows that this encompassed not only violent pornography but also “vulgar elements” to which Palme had not extended his liberal blessing either. The emphasis was not so much on visual explicitness as on deviations from a heteronormative perspective. Objections were raised concerning film scenes portraying a sexuality that was seen as “objectionable” or “abnormal”, such as scenes showing lesbian sex or masturbation or indeed Sjöman’s images, which, albeit with polemic intent, broke sexual taboos. Even in liberal Sweden, Larsson concluded, there were implied norms in relation to sexuality and these determined what was to be considered likely to impair or imperil the personal development of individuals. Key criteria for a ban, such as coarsening or brutalisation, were merely pretexts, and subjectivity had simply been concealed behind a pretence of objectivity.

How are films addressing and depicting sexuality rated today, and what are the norms behind the decisions?

The Scandinavian cluster

First of all, it is clear that youth media protection in Sweden is still characterised by a relaxed attitude to sexuality coupled with a rather stricter approach to violence. After all, one of the Swedish examiners stated, sex is also a good thing, while violence is something no one would wish upon anyone. Comparisons of film ratings regularly show a corresponding cluster across Scandinavia in contrast to the Anglo-American sphere, where depictions of sexuality are rated quite rigidly while violence is generally much more accepted.

The third part of the Planet of the Apes science fiction saga, [War for the Planet of the Apes](#) (USA 2017), was cleared for viewers aged 12 and over in Germany, the Netherlands and Great Britain, as was the war drama [Dunkirk](#) (GB/USA/F/NL 2017). In Sweden, both films were given certificates for persons aged 15 and over – the highest age rating available.

In comparison, the stop-motion film [Anomalisa](#) (USA 2015) was not seen as detrimental to children despite a lengthy sex scene that includes extended oral gratification and was cleared for viewers aged seven and over. The British BBFC characterised this love play for puppets as “a scene of strong sex featuring strong nudity” and gave the film a 15 rating. In most other countries, including Germany, the film was approved for viewers aged either 11 and over or 12 and over. The [Freiwillige Selbstkontrolle der Filmwirtschaft](#) (Voluntary Self-Regulation of the Film Industry, FSK) felt the sex scene was liable to “irritate and overtax” children under 12.⁶

Just as striking is the difference between the various ratings given to the animated film [Sausage Party](#) (USA 2016), which was rated R in the USA (for viewers aged 17 and over) because of a sex orgy among foodstuffs in a supermarket. A moaning sausage slides into a hot dog

bun, followed directly by Camembert-cracker and taco-Tabasco-sauce couplings, causing *Der Spiegel* to quip that the scene “adds a totally new meaning to the notion of ‘food porn’”.⁷ In almost every country, this zany comedy was certified only for viewers aged 15 or 16 and over. Even in France, which is normally extremely reluctant to impose any restriction on artistic freedom in cinema, the film was approved only for viewers aged 12 and over. Only in Sweden and Denmark could *Sausage Party* be viewed by children as young as 11, and indeed seven if accompanied by adults.

Specific evaluation criteria

The various institutions considered in the survey differ fundamentally in terms of whether they use specific criteria as a basis for evaluating sexual conduct or apply generally held criteria to specific cases.

If parents are supplied with precise information about the content of films, the criteria will reflect their expectations in the light of sexual morals in their society. Sexual content is described precisely, and age categorisation is structured around its form and frequency: the more abundant and explicit the sex scene, the higher the age rating. As to which types of content are considered suitable or appropriate for which age bracket, this varies according to the respective cultural context.

In the USA, the rigid decision-making practice of the [Motion Picture Association of America \(MPAA\)](#) is clearly in line with the presumed level of general prudery. Borderline cases are rare, unlike those relating to violence, because nudity (even in a non-sexualised context), sexualised language or even generalised indications of sex will frequently be enough to result in the adult R rating. Take the road movie [American Honey](#) (GB/USA 2016), which tells the story of a teenage girl from a poor background who falls in with a travelling sales crew. Here, the “heavily sexualised content” and “explicit nudity” – a teenage boy shows his penis to the group twice and there are two passionate sex scenes – were instrumental in the R rating awarded to the film.

Likewise in the UK, public opinion and parents’ expectations are essential elements in determining the structural subtleties of the list of criteria. For children aged under 12, only understated sexual behaviour – such as kisses, brief nude scenes in a non-sexualised context and sexual references – is permitted. In a film approved for viewers aged 12 and over, nudity with sexual references is allowed but must remain relatively brief and understated. Frequent and unambiguous sexual references or crudely sexualised language are not acceptable for this age group, and such films will without fail be certified for those aged 15 and over, hence the 15 rating for [American Honey](#): “There is a single use of very strong language (‘c**t’), as well as strong language throughout (‘f**k’ and ‘motherf**ker’). Sex scenes include buttock nudity and sight of pubic hair, as well as thrusting and ‘riding’. [...] There is full frontal male nudity as a man exposes himself in front of his friends and as he dances naked on the roof of a van.”

Automatic classification systems like [Kijkwijzer](#) (Netherlands) or [KAVI](#) (Finland) also work with precise descriptive criteria, but are significantly more liberal in their allocation of corresponding age brackets. In both countries, even fairly frank sex scenes such as those found in teen comedies are cleared for viewing from the age of 12, provided they are not too frequent and no details can be seen. In Finland, [American Honey](#) was therefore approved for viewers aged 12 and over. In the Netherlands it was rated 16, although in this territory the rating was due to its depictions of alcohol and drug consumption.

Similarly, the classification systems in Australia, Canada, Ireland, Singapore and South Africa reflect the respective social and moral values, offering parents guidance by means of clear coherent evaluation categories. In Australia, *American Honey* was rated 15; in Ireland it was rated 16, in Canada 18 and in both South Africa and Singapore 21.

Developmental impairment and context

In countries that prioritise the issue of potential developmental impairment, such as Germany, the Scandinavian nations and France, the criteria are more general and ratings depend on context. Age categorisation is not a recommendation – it merely indicates that potential risks have been ruled out. In general, there are no specific criteria for the evaluation of sexual content.

In Sweden, for example, nudity (even in a sexual context), consensual sex with no details shown (e.g. under the covers), explicit sexualised language or sexual allusions will not, in themselves, lead to any age restriction. [American Honey](#) – which is not primarily a film about sex but rather a coming-of-age tale and a love story set against the backdrop of a bleak America located somewhere between the east and west coast – was approved for viewers aged 11 and over in Sweden. In Germany, too, the context is essential: the image of sexuality conveyed and any potentially resonant tendencies towards violence or discrimination. Accordingly, the FSK evaluated the crude language and drug consumption in the light of the social milieu depicted, decided that the scenes of violence and sex were “staged with considerable restraint” and ruled that there was no risk of the film impairing the development of viewers aged 12 and over. In France, the film could be viewed in cinemas without any age restriction, albeit with a warning.

Sexual orientation

In most countries, sexual orientation no longer plays a role in the age rating process. One exception is Singapore, where any depiction of sexuality will result in at least an 18 rating and same-sex intercourse will only be permitted in the highest category, for viewers aged 21 and over, provided the film does not propagate or justify a homosexual lifestyle.

One film affected is the drama [Carol](#) (GB/USA 2015), which tells the story of a lesbian love affair shattered by societal prejudices in 1950s America. The very topic of homosexuality was enough to earn the film an R-21 rating in Singapore. In Britain, the BBFC focused on a scene implying sex, classifying this as extreme: "A strong sex scene features sexualised breast nudity and the suggestion of oral sex, with one woman's head between another's legs". This led to a 15 rating (R in the USA, 18 in Korea, 16 in South Africa and 15 in Ireland). In the Netherlands and Finland, the same scene resulted in a 12 rating. The FSK expressed appreciation for the "tranquil elegant images" and the restrained dramatisation of an erotic moment and approved the film for viewers aged six and over (in France and Norway, there was no age limit).

Likewise, when it came to classifying the Academy-Award-winning drama [Moonlight](#) (USA 2016), the indication of a homoerotic relationship was again what determined the film's 18 rating in Singapore. In Great Britain, once again, the frank sex scenes earned it a 15 rating: "Scenes of sexual activity include implied masturbation and penetration, and in one scene a character wakes up following a 'wet dream'. Strong verbal references are made to oral sex and intercourse". (The film was rated R in the USA, 18 in Korea and 15 in Ireland). The rationale set out by the FSK does not even mention either the homoerotic relationship between the protagonist and his friend or any frank sex scenes. Instead, the key factors leading to the film's 12 rating were its "forceful portrayals of conflicts, violence and drug abuse". (The film was rated 11 in Sweden and Denmark, 12 in Norway and Finland and 12 in the Netherlands; in France, there was no age limit.)

Social acceptance

The benefits and drawbacks of both approaches are clear: the standardisation of information concerning a film's content allows reliable categories and specific features to be established for use in assigning films to a particular age group, eliminating subjective influences as far as possible. Since general values and expectations are included, social acceptance is relatively high and complaints are correspondingly rare. However, the context is not taken into consideration and the rating often fails to do justice to the subject matter, given that a film is more than the sum of its individual parts.

In comparison, when generally held criteria are construed fairly freely, the risk is greater of subjective influence from the examiners. Board plurality can help to counteract this, but borderline cases can still go one way or the other, depending on the composition of the respective board and the personal attitudes of its members. Expert opinions reached after extensive discussion and taking the whole film into consideration are often very different from the perceptions of parents. Just as almost all viewer enquiries submitted to the [Freiwillige Selbstkontrolle Fernsehen \(Voluntary Self-Regulation of Television, FSF\)](#) relate to sexually themed content that appears inappropriate for daytime or prime-time broadcast, in Sweden, too, complaints are aimed primarily at sexual content that is perceived as being too liberal.

New conservatism

In the light of the above, Mariah Larsson feels it is far from certain that Sweden's legendary permissive attitude towards consensual sex will endure. Just under two decades ago, there was no appreciable response when [American Pie](#) (USA 1999) was approved for viewers aged seven and over; by contrast, the controversy and debate generated by the various ratings awarded to *Sausage Party* even extended to modern-day Sweden. In 2015 public service broadcaster [SVT](#) caused something of a stir when it aired the cartoon [Snoppen och Snippan](#) (English-language version: "Willie and Twinkle") as part of its children's programming. This was an educational video featuring dancing penises and vaginas with hats and glasses and microphones, the aim being to make it easier for parents to talk to their children about genitals – many, however, saw this as an unreasonable imposition. Such complaints, says Larsson, are symptomatic of social change. On the one hand, there is a great deal of permissiveness in the way ratings are allocated; on the other, society has also become more puritan.

A conservative headwind is also apparent in France. Christian organisations were up in arms about the 12 rating given to *Sausage Party* by the [Centre national du cinéma et de l'image animée \(National Centre for Cinema and the Moving Image, CNC\)](#), and the chair of the Christian Democratic Party sent the minister responsible an open letter demanding that she withdraw the rating. "Tell us how you justify showing a gigantic orgy in front of families," asked a tweet while attempting to boost its own impact by displaying stills – unambiguously pornographic, supposedly – from the offending film. The tweet was from *La Manif pour tous* ("The demonstration for everyone"), a movement that opposes same-sex marriage and advocates preserving the traditional family.⁸

Conclusion

The age rating process for films with sexual content varies considerably, depending on the ethico-sexual norms underlying the ratings criteria. This is true both from one country to the next and within any given society. Acceptance of ratings will generally be higher if the criteria on which they are based are made public. In Germany, unlike in Sweden, it is not a matter of whether content is suitable or in line with moral standards or might possibly prompt awkward questions. The sole issue is whether content might impair or endanger children in their personal development. In this respect, the Scandinavian countries place greater emphasis than Germany on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and on a child's right to information and access to the media. It would be a good idea to factor the child's perspective into the risk evaluation process. The first steps are underway in Denmark, where children's panels have been established with a view to finding out what kind of content young people themselves perceive as transgressive – all of which would be unthinkable anywhere else.

Notes:

- 1 For more information about the survey and the results please contact Johan Karlsson from the [Swedish Media Council](mailto:johan.karlsson@statensmedierad.se): johan.karlsson@statensmedierad.se
- 2 Kårlin, H.: [Die schwedische Sünde im Nostalgicum in Göteborg](http://goteborg-schweden.blogspot.de/2010/07/die-schwedische-sunde-im-nostalgicum-in.html) ("The Swedish Sin in the Nostalgicum Museum in Gothenburg"), available at: <http://goteborg-schweden.blogspot.de/2010/07/die-schwedische-sunde-im-nostalgicum-in.html>
- 3 Sündige Brüder ("Brothers in sin") in *Der Spiegel*, 15/1964, 16.09.1964, available at: <http://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/d-46174390.html>
- 4 [David Frost interviewing Olof Palme, 1969](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yLfBDHsfMPI), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yLfBDHsfMPI>
- 5 [Streng bei Gewalt, großzügig bei Sex – Jugendschutz in Schweden](#) ("Strict on violence, liberal on sex"), Joachim von Gottberg interviews Erik Wallander in *tv diskurs*, issue 6, 3/1998, pp 4–15
- 6 For the grounds for decisions by the BBFC, see <http://www.bbfc.co.uk/>; for the grounds for decisions by the FSK, see <https://www.spio-fsk.de/?seitid=2>
- 7 Busche, A.: Versaute Würstchen, prude Brötchen. Animationsfilm "Sausage Party" ("Filthy sausages, prudish buns: the animated film *Sausage Party*") by Spiegel Online, 6.10.2016, available at: <http://www.spiegel.de/kultur/kino/sausage-party-versautewuerstchen-pruede-broetchen-a-1115128.html>
- 8 Vietzen, J.: "Pornographie für Zwölfjährige": Aufregung um französische Altersfreigabe von "Sausage Party" ("Pornography for twelve-year-olds: uproar in France over the age rating for *Sausage Party*") by Filmstarts, 2.12.2016, available at: <http://www.filmstarts.de/nachrichten/18508913.html>

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