Austrian Board of Media Classification (ABMC)

Age Rating
of Movies and Similar Image Carriers
by the Austrian Youth Media Commission

Preamble

Video media have a firm place in the everyday life of children and youths who have found many different uses for their wide range of functions, from narrator of fairy tales to source of information. Faced with such a degree of individuality in media perception, it is difficult for those charged with evaluating and rating to furnish clear-cut statements on the effect of such media.

Experts agree that the media will impact (also) on children not so much by triggering emotions but as a repeater and amplifier of experiences and emotions viewers have already been previously exposed to.

An important factor is how viewpoints are reflected. In this, attention must not focus on the movie but solely on the questions: How will the child or youth (conceivably) deal with a particular movie? What can children and youths of a given age group be expected to cope with (in a positive sense)? What will challenge them emotionally and intellectually (in an educational sense)?

Generally, the Youth Media Commission releases movies as suitable for the consumption of children and youths when no negative impact is to be feared. This includes movie that, due to their content and arrangement, are of little or no interest to children and youths. The expectation that a movie will not be positively received by them constitutes no grounds to perceive any negative impact.

Thinking along these lines, the Youth Media Commission sees itself as a service point for parents, educators and junior media consumers. It makes available its age ratings to the Austrian *Länder*, distributors, TV stations and all other interested parties. Its age ratings refer to the degree to which a given movie is expected to have a negative effect on the young.

As an extra service, the Youth Media Commission awards recommendations that include guidance on the age levels for which a movie is suitable.

<u>Criteria for age ratings</u>

Negative influence on:

Physical health

duration of the movie
overstimulation of visual or auditive perception

Mental and emotional development

fear and anxiety
distress
emotional shock

Intellectual and cognitive development

understanding the plot along the lines of filmic language
open end
character models
role models
models of conflict resolution

Social-ethic and moral development

serious disorientation regarding the ability to distinguish between good and evil
failure to punish crimes
vigilante justice
content likely to boost violent attitudes or to dull aversion to violence
offending decency and accepted taboos
positive presentation of drug and alcohol use

Religious feelings

disparaging religious teachings and symbols
incitement to religious intolerance

Democratic and civic attitudes

totalitarism
political extremism
racism
sexism
discrimination of ethnic and religious minorities

Released for all age groups:

In order to be released for all age groups, movies should, as a rule, be not longer than 90 minutes. Their dramaturgical structure should allow children below the age of six to mentally absent themselves from the story temporarily.

The movie should be edited so as to have longer scenes inbetween short cuts. Children like beautiful, drawn-out images and are irritated when these are suddenly interrupted. Special attention needs to be given to camera angles and settings, especially for animated cartoons.

The language used should be clear and distinct, without too much rapid-fire dialogue. Another important feature is the score: loud and aggressive music is distressing. Dark sequences, accompanied by a threatening score, will enhance negative emotions.

Another criterion is the content. Children under six should, at least to some extent, be able to respond to the content – they should be given an opportunity to laugh, be glad, have fun about what happens on the screen. Animals are very important because small children tend to identify with them.

Pre-schoolers cannot distinguish between imagination and reality – they experience both as "real". As a rule, the younger the children, the more easily they are out of their depth and frightened.

A movie showing a mental stress situation inappropriate for a given age group affects its rating. This would include scenes of people being left alone, children in a strange surrounding, situations that trigger fear or sadness or sudden frightening events.

Released for children from age 6:

This rating assumes that elementary school children are better able to distinguish between imagination and reality. They usually have sufficient media experience to protect themselves from harrowing film situations by using "distancing strategies" (e.g. putting their hands over their eyes, holding their ears, doing something else, leaving the room temporarily, switching to another channel with the remote control). Other than their younger peers, they do not absolutely require happy endings for individual shots or scenes but still want stories they can cope with.

First-graders realise that animated cartoons are fictitious – "just a movie". Slapstick violence is felt to be unrealistic and thus more harmless than violence in real-world movies.

A key element is the happy ending. Children of that age are still strongly focused on animals, but can already handle more realistic scenes, such as the death of an animal. This age group consciously perceives the family as a sheltered zone (in contrast to the school) and is highly sensitive to family subjects: movie parents divorcing, movie children running away from home are contents that are registered by children. "Family movies" in particular need to be watched for this aspect.

Most school children are familiar with media merchandising. They are surrounded by media heroes/heroines and media contents: T-shirts, toys and many other merchandising products prepare them for a cinema and TV experience and let them re-live that experience. The children are aware of and see through the methods used by such merchandised movies to raise the excitement level (action, story structure). Nevertheless, attention needs to be given to the presentation which must clarify that turbulences are purely part of the story.

Problems are posed by movies that allow no clear-cut moral attributes, because children aged six to eight still think mostly along simple black and white, good and bad guy lines. The more removed such scenarios are from the children's everyday life, the less frightening they are. News reports, documentaries and realistic movies that show violence and threatening situations can seriously distress and frighten children.

Released for children from age 8
Children aged 8-10 years are generally already able to understand longer and more complex film plots. Motives and intentions of film characters are clearly identified by 8-year-olds, since they have already advanced in their affective-emotional development and have thus developed the ability to see through and foresee the plots. At this age children are increasingly able to take different perspectives and even anticipate the reactions of media characters, assuming, that is, that the contents are related to their own environment.
Everyday stories of all kinds in which empathy with the characters is possible, or even required, are therefore of great interest. In addition, fantasy and science fiction films that show the development of a certain independence, their own role model (girl / boy) and friendships with peers, can also create important moments of identification.
The level of cognitive performance and reasoning of 8-year-old children is significantly higher than that of 6-year-olds, and therefore the films may be, in a formal sense, a little more demanding. Furthermore, children at this age often develop an interest in cinematic design media and their first concept of genre.
The main and sub-plots, or indeed simple temporal and spatial jumps, are usually followed properly. The use of ellipses and their mental supplementation can come with relative ease to 8-year-old children. Even more complicated plots with multiple figures are usually understood. In contrast, rapid scene changes, flashbacks, time lapses and other stylistic aspects of the film can sometimes be confusing, and are therefore considered more carefully. Tension elements or elements of the so-called anxiety-like processes can also be better processed, though they should not be too long or have a lasting effect.
Children from the age of 8 or 9 years can largely distinguish between fiction and reality. An exception would be reality stories and news-like representations, where children find it difficult to distinguish between reality and fiction because of the documentary nature of the material.
It is possible for children of this age group to distance themselves from the film scene, at least to a certain extent. Certain genres such as fairy tales, science fiction or animation films are clearly identified as such. Nevertheless, it should be noted: certain movie content can trigger strong concerns with the individual child, e.g. if the child has faced problems in the real world similar to those of the film character. The more this happens, the greater the participation and thus the emotional involvement in the events. A positive resolution of conflict situations or frightening sequences and a clear happy ending are therefore of great importance even for this age group. Children from 8 to 10 years are not yet in a position to sufficiently deal with open ends.

Released for children from age 10:

Between age 10 and 12, children have acquired sufficient media experience to understand movie scenes and assess their potential threat. They draw parallels between their own experience and what they see in the movie.

Children of this age group perceive the complexity of a story line. They begin to develop special preferences and thus media competence, i.e. they know about formats, story lines, genres. They develop individual partialities and – with the exception of TV and cinema gluttons – become choosy about programmes, shows and movies.

Another characteristic feature of this age group is that children begin to show empathy and even enjoy dangerous and spooky scenes (always providing an intact social environment). Just like adults like to be thrilled by a Hitchcock movie, children love the "tunnel of horror" effect of exciting stories, as evidenced by the fascination exerted by fairy tales which are typically gruesome and scary.

Provided that the children voluntarily and in the secure knowledge of an inevitable happy ending expose themselves to an electrifying media event and recognise the threats as being an external and objective danger (villains, monsters, ogres, aliens, etc.), they can face the story by drawing on ways to still their "lust for fear".

Released for children from age 12:

Twelve-year-olds are capable of following the overall story and cope with fraught-filled scenes. They are well able to distinguish between reality and fiction. Their understanding of the story is no longer tied to a chronological pattern. They can separate the essential from the non-essential and are able to understand complex stylistic artifices such as flashbacks.

This age group shows a marked media socialisation. Messages transmitted by the audiovisual media are easily deciphered. As a result, this age group is increasingly interested in fantasy and SF movies, and in spoofs of movie genres.

This understanding of movie tools, however, comes at a time when they pass through a difficult phase in their own development:
– loosening of parental ties,
– criticism of the adult world,
– increasing attachment to peer groups,
– emulation of extra-family role models,
– wrangling with religious issues,
– identity problems arising from sexual maturity,
– susceptibility to gender clichés,
– strong sense of fairness, which frequently leaves little room for more complex approaches prescribed by the established order.

When these factors are considered, the rating process needs to account not just for the image projected, but has to look into the ideology behind the image. This does not mean censorship, but simply the questioning of the film's message and its effect on the age group. For youths, there is still a long way to go from emotional understanding of the image to a rational capacity to see through ideologies, conceptions of the world and biases.

Released from age 14:

This age group to all intents and purposes has viewing habits similar to those of adults. Its members wish to be seen as adults – as is confirmed by empirical studies. In their behaviour they are increasingly guided by the peer group rather than the parental home.

Fourteen-year-olds have much media experience, although they are still lacking in life experience. When watching bad movies they mercilessly see through every faux pas and blunder committed by the makers. But when they meet up with well-made movies, they develop astonishingly little detachment.

When their own world is perceived as insecure, certain genres are ecstatically received. Movies whose action heroes fight and vanquish an array of high-tech fiends are extremely popular. Although most of the youths see through such movies and judge them as being just spectacular entertainment, consideration still needs to be given to the fact that such movies strengthen and justify negative dispositions. They are problematic when they restrict themselves to simple solutions, make light of violence and exploit brute force for entertainment purposes.

Released from age 16:

Youths of that age generally have considerable media competence. Nevertheless, movies that send socially damaging messages are still problematic. Under Austrian law, movies that discriminate against particular groups, show sexual scenes in an abusive context (or reduce sex to an urge-gratifying tool), run counter to partnership-based gender relations or – worst of all – glorify violence, may be released only for viewers from age 16. Grounds for restrictions up to age 16 are appeals to religious intolerance, violation of accepted taboos, political extremism, xenophobia, racism and the positive depiction of drugs and alcohol.

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