



OFFICE OF FILM
& LITERATURE
CLASSIFICATION

Te Tari Whakarōpū Tukuata, Tubitubinga

The Grudge **Introduction**

On 14 December 2004 the Chief Censor directed the Secretary for Internal Affairs under s13(3) of the Films, Videos and Publications Classification Act 1993, to obtain a copy of the film *The Grudge*, directed by Takashi Shimizu and submit it for classification.

The Grudge, an American remake of a Japanese film, originally carried an M rating in New Zealand. This rating was given to the film through the process of cross-rating unrestricted films with the rating they have been given by the Australian Office of Film and Literature Classification.

The Grudge is a psychological drama/horror film and is set in Tokyo (though American actors play the lead characters). A young American woman is studying and working as a part-time home-help in Tokyo. She goes to help an invalid American woman and becomes involved in the curse of a house inhabited by violently enraged ghosts who kill all who come into contact with them. As is usual in this type of film, plot and characterisation are secondary in importance to its scare factor, the various killings, and to the clever use of ominous and atmospheric soundtrack and visual effects to heighten tension and suspense.

"I am concerned that the rating on the movie The Grudge...does not reflect the disturbing potential impact this movie may have on some audiences...I do not like the idea that children will be allowed to see this film, and parents will let them, because it is only an M-rated picture.."
- Letter from complainant.

The ratings given to [this film] by the Australian OFLC appear anomalous in light of ratings awarded in other jurisdictions. - Letter from the Chief Censor to the Secretary for Internal Affairs.

In his direction to the Secretary for Internal Affairs to submit *The Grudge* to the Office, the Chief Censor outlined the following reasons:

"The BBFC [British Board of Film Classification] restricted The Grudge to persons 15 years of age and over with a note that it contained 'strong psychological horror'. The rating given to [this film] by the Australian OFLC appear anomalous in light of ratings awarded in other jurisdictions. The Office has also received complaints about the rating of [the film]. Although [it is] nearing the end of [its] theatrical run, any reclassifications will apply to identical video and DVD versions."

The film was submitted to the Office on 21 December 2004 and was examined for classification. Under section 3(1) of the Films, Videos, and Publications Classification Act 1993, matters of horror, cruelty and violence were considered in relation to *The Grudge*. Some scenes in the film, especially those involving the depiction of realistic domestic violence, suicide and gruesome murders, are horrific in nature. Most depictions of violence employ camera cut-away techniques to reduce their impact and blood is minimal. Violence is implied by the discovery of dead bodies following scenes in which characters who investigate odd noises are suddenly confronted by ghostly faces and their bodies are pulled up into roof spaces or down into baths of water. Elements of cruelty are involved in the fear inflicted on characters before their death.



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There are a couple of scenes that differ slightly from the rest of the film in terms of their impact. One is a scene in which a character who was earlier snatched by one of the ghostly creatures haunting the house is rediscovered shuffling through an office at night. When she turns around, it is revealed that a part of her face has been removed. The depiction, although brief, stands out in the film in terms of its graphic impact. Another high-impact scene is a grainy black and white sequence which shows a man terrorising his wife and child before killing them and then himself. This scene functions as explanatory or contextual to the one which precedes it in which a woman's body is discovered. This rapid-edited sequence is of considerable impact due to its more realistic implication of domestic abuse and cruelty.

In letters of complaint made to the Office, members of the public raised concerns about the M rating on the film meaning that anyone, including young children, could potentially watch it. They felt that an age restriction would be more appropriate for the film, in one case after their child had seen the film, and in another after having viewed the film themselves.

*“Although the infliction of serious physical harm in the feature is generally implied rather than directly depicted, the feature does involve some genuinely frightening elements. While the impact of many of these scenes is lessened by the unlikely nature of some of the scenarios, the violence occurs in areas where people, especially children, are encouraged to believe they are safe.”
- OFLC Classification Decision.*

“The fear-response of the audience is heightened by their own normal feelings of vulnerability when it is dark and they are alone. This is why fear-responses are well-known to continue when the viewers of psychological thrillers and horror films return to their own real lives.” – OFLC classification decision.

*“Last week my 11 year old daughter was talked into seeing this by a friend and a level headed, sensible child has been rendered seriously disturbed. I wonder if an age restricted rating even R13 might have been more appropriate”.
– Letter from complainant.*

“I am concerned that the rating on the movie The Grudge...does not reflect the disturbing potential impact this movie may have on some audiences...I do not like the idea that children will be allowed to see this film, and parents will let them, because it is only an M-rated picture. I have a lot of respect for your office and the function it provides...However, on this particular occasion I felt like writing a friendly email to wonder if maybe certifying this movie for general exhibition might not have been a little generous...as a movie lover who has a strong belief in the function performed by the OFLC, I feel the need to register my feeling that, on this occasion, another look at the classification might be in order.” – Letter from complainant.

In its classification decision, the Office concluded that although the infliction of serious physical harm in the feature is generally implied rather than directly depicted, the feature involves some genuinely frightening elements. While the impact of many of these scenes is lessened by the unlikely nature of some of the scenarios, the



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The Office considered that younger viewers, with less ability to determine the real from the choreographed special effect, are likely to find some of the more frightening scenes disturbing to them in other real situations. Another factor taken into consideration was that the fact that the violent and murderous spirits are all Asian could have a negative impact on the attitudes of younger viewers who have been disturbed or frightened by the film.

The Office classified *The Grudge* as R16 with the descriptive note “contains horror scenes”.

Questions

- 1) Like many films, *The Grudge* received a variety of ratings internationally. Look up the classifications it received in other countries. How do these compare to the New Zealand classification? Can you think of other films that have been rated differently from country to country? Are there any patterns in terms of which countries have higher and lower ratings?
- 2) In its decision, the Office noted the fact that all the evil characters belonged to the same ethnic group and suggested that this might negatively affect the attitudes of younger people towards this group. What do you think about this idea? Can you think of other examples of ethnic groups being presented in a negative way? What impacts might these have on people’s behaviour? (think about this in connection to injury to the public good).
- 3) How does the realism of scary events in films affect the way audiences react to them? Do people of different ages react to frightening images in the same way?