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OFFICE OF FILM
& LITERATURE
CLASSIFICATION

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Introduction

The Term 3 2012 Censor for a Day events were held at the Readings Courtenay in Wellington, Event Cinemas Chartwell in Hamilton, and at Bay City Cinemas in Tauranga. In total 391 students and teachers from fifteen schools attended.

Censor for a Day has three key purposes:

- to provide senior Media Studies students with first-hand experience of a system they are studying at school;
- to engage with students and inform them about this system which directly impacts their day-to-day media choices and consumption; and
- to give the Classification Office insights into the opinions of key stakeholders in the classification system. High school students form a significant group in terms of film and DVD audiences, and are directly affected by age-restricted film classifications in a way that adults are not.



Students were given a presentation about New Zealand's classification system by Kate Ward, our Information and Policy Manager, including an overview of the Films, Videos, and Publications Classification Act 1993. They learned about the process followed by Classification Officers ('censors') when classifying films, video games, and other publications.

Students were asked to evaluate the film *Abraham Lincoln Vampire Hunter* using New Zealand's classification criteria. The film had been classified but not yet released in cinemas.

Wellington students learning about the classification system at Censor for a Day

After watching the film, the students completed a classification form with the help of a Classification Officer and decided on an appropriate classification. Students were then led through a discussion about how they applied the classification criteria to the film, and the reasons behind their individual classification choices. There was also opportunity for students to ask Classification Office staff questions about other aspects of New Zealand's classification system.

In order to ensure that the Classification Office performs its role effectively, it is important to be aware of the public's views on our classification decisions, and on the censorship system as a

whole. Censor for a Day is not only about teaching young people about the classification system — it's about hearing their views on the role of censorship in our society, especially as it relates to children and young people as they are generally the groups most affected by the decisions we make. As always, the views of participating students were thoughtful, constructive, and sometimes challenging. We are grateful for the chance to hear them.

The Film



The movie poster for *Abraham Lincoln Vampire Hunter*

Abraham Lincoln Vampire Hunter is classified R16 with the descriptive note 'contains violence and horror'. The film is an American fantasy-horror film about the secret life of American president, Abraham Lincoln.

After his mother is killed by an evil vampire, a young Abraham vows to avenge her death. A man named Henry Sturgess offers to teach Abraham how to be a vampire hunter and Abraham agrees.

The film is directed by Timur Bekmambetov and is based on the novel by Seth Grahame-Smith (who also wrote the novel *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*).

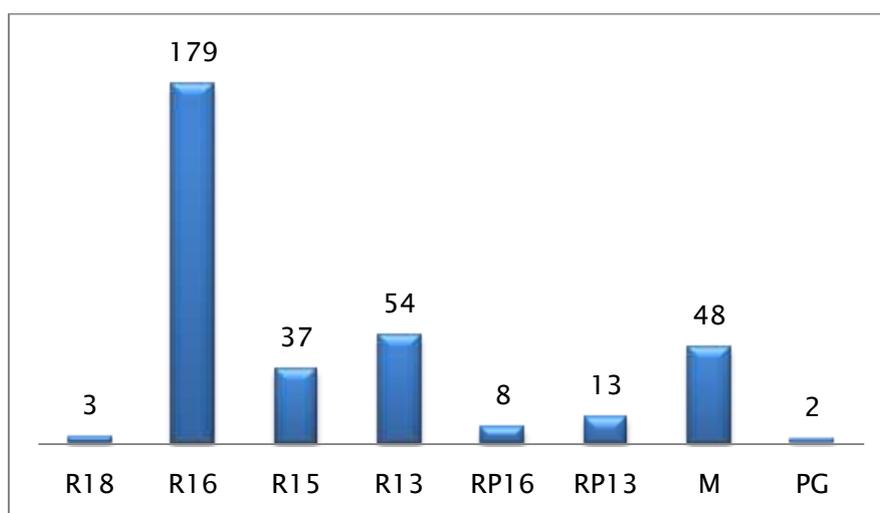


Hamilton students classifying *Abraham Lincoln Vampire Hunter* at Censor for a Day

Survey Results: An Overview

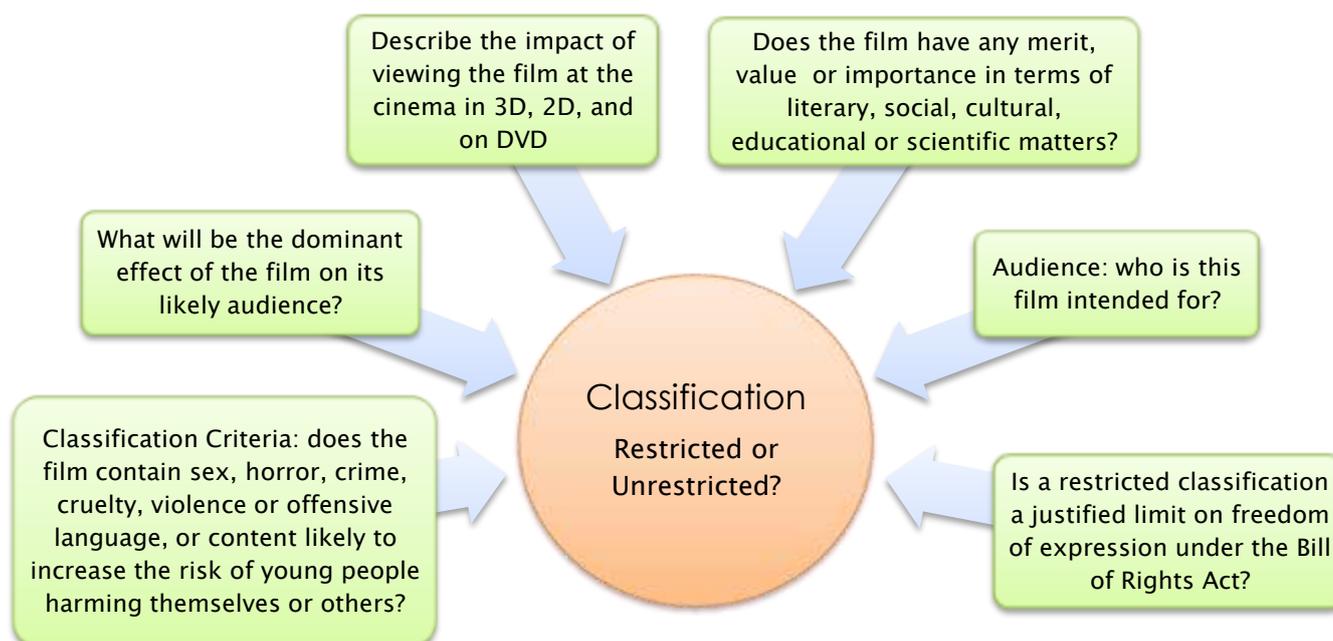
Most students (85%) thought that the film should have an age restriction assigned — these ranged from RP13 (restricted to people 13 years and over unless accompanied by a parent or guardian) to R18 (restricted to people 18 years and over). A majority (52%) of the students decided the film should be classified R16.

Of the 15% who opted for an unrestricted classification, 14% assigned the film a classification of M (suitable for mature audiences 16 years and over) and 1% opted for the PG classification (parental guidance recommended for younger viewers).



The Classification Exercise

After viewing the film, students applied the classification criteria which had been explained to them and filled out a classification form — a pared down version of the 21-page consideration sheet Classification Officers use when classifying a film. The exercise involved students answering the following questions which relate to specific sections in the Classification Act. The students were asked to use their answers to these questions to decide on a suitable classification and descriptive note.



After evaluating *Abraham Lincoln Vampire Hunter* using New Zealand's classification criteria, students decided on a particular age restriction — for example R13 or R16 — or they decided the film should be unrestricted, for example classifying the film as M (suitable for mature audiences 16 years and over).

Reasons for classification

A wide range of reasons were given by students in order to justify their choice of a particular classification.

R18 – restricted to people 18 years and over

Three students chose the R18 classification. Students who chose this classification did so mainly due to the level of violence in the film, which they considered to be too graphic for anyone under 18:

[R18] because of the constant use of weapons, the gruesome killings that are represented within the film. Killing/murder is encouraged right throughout the film. There is no remorse or anything.

- Student from Sacred Heart Girls' College (Hamilton)

R16 – restricted to people 16 years and over

Many of the students who classified the film R16 expressed concern about the levels of violence and horror in the film. They suggested that audiences younger than 16 would be traumatised by the film's graphic content, but by the age of 16 audiences would have seen other films similar to this and be able to put the violence into context.

The depictions of drug use and crime in the film were also seen as justified reasons for restricting the film to persons aged 16 and over:

The violence is depicted in quite a gruesome and detailed way, and the horror element could be found distressing. Despite this, the context was supernatural so was removed from reality.

- Student from Onslow College (Wellington)

The film contains some gruesome violence that could frighten younger viewers. Also I think the storyline requires a more developed and intelligent viewer that knows about history and can actually separate a movie from real life.

- Student from Wellington High School

Many scenes would scare children. A lot of blood and gore, but little support of this. Most violence etc. is purely fantasy/unrealistic due to vampires. It was not really designed for younger audiences, nor could they appreciate much of the context. Some scenes of cruelty.

- Student from Hamilton Boys' High School

A lot of horror films fit into the R16 category and I think this film should too. I think that the graphic violence in the film could be very disturbing to younger viewers but I don't think that is at an extent that it should be restricted 18+.

– Student from Otumoetai College (Tauranga)

R15 – restricted to people 15 years and over

Use of the R15 classification by the Classification Office is uncommon, but was chosen by 11% of students. Reasons given by students for assigning this classification were similar to the reasons given by those who classified the film as R16, with students expressing concern about the impact of the violence and horror on younger audiences while acknowledging the film's unrealistic and supernatural elements.

The film centres around committing acts of violence in order to benefit the protagonist, with these acts shown to a great extent throughout the film – this, and the brief sexual content, would not be suitable for a young audience, however, the stylised nature means a higher rating would not be justified.

– Student from Hamilton Boys' High School

R13 – restricted to people 13 years and over

R13 was the second most commonly chosen classification, chosen by 16% of students. In justifying their classification choice, students clearly indicated that while they felt the film was harmful to 'children and young people', thirteen-year-olds did not fall into these categories. They agreed that the film contained strong levels of violence, but gave weight to the mitigating factors of the film's humour and fantasy aspects:

It had violence and horror scenes that can disturb young children, but by the age of 13 they often have an idea of what is real and what isn't to have a better understanding.

– Student from Heretaunga College (Wellington)

Contains reasonable graphic violence, but it so farfetched that it is unlikely to cause harm to the public. Language/sexual content is relatively minimal. Contains humour aspect which counteracts violence.

– Student from Wellington Girls' College

Not suitable for young people, easily influenced at that age. At 13 you can decide, and have experience of what you can or can't handle. Also fictional so it's not believable.

– Student from Hamilton Christian School

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Restricted because there is a lot of violence, cruelty, crime, horror and graphic scenes which young people should not see. There is also a little nudity. It could also be quite scary to some people. What makes this less restricted is the good messages such as equal rights and the consequences of the bad actions are shown.

– Student from Otumoetai College (Tauranga)

RP16 and RP13– restricted to people 16/13 and over unless accompanied by a parent or guardian

RP16 was chosen by 2% of students and RP13 by 4%. Similar to the reasoning used by other students who restricted the film, students who assigned the film these classifications felt that the unrealistic tone of the film lessened the likelihood of injury to the public good provided that parents or guardians accompanied younger viewers:

[RP16 because] the time period that the film is set and the fantastic nature of the subject material minimises the impact of the violence. The music is mostly epic, not sinister, lifting the atmosphere. Parents can talk with younger children who may not understand the fantasy setting.

– Student from Hamilton Boys' High School

[RP13 because] it is still quite gross in parts, but not to the point where you would be sick. I think if your parent thinks it's ok for you to see it then you should be fine, if they don't you just have to wait to see it when you are older.

– Student from Fairfield College (Hamilton)

M – suitable for mature audiences 16 years and over

The unrestricted M classification was the third most popular with students for this film, with 14% assigning this classification. Students who opted for the unrestricted M classification felt that the unrealistic nature of violence meant that it was unlikely young viewers would be tempted to imitate it and there would be no lasting negative impact on audiences:

The film contains quite a bit of violence and horror-like scenes but I think it should not be restricted as it doesn't have anything that could impact you as it is not believable.

– Female, Fairfield College (Hamilton)

I don't think it would be any higher as it did not contain very much horror and minimal violence. It is more of an exciting action movie.

– Student from St Johns' College (Hamilton)

PG – Parental Guidance recommended for younger viewers

Two students assigned *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* an unrestricted classification of PG. These students based their classification choice on their perceptions of the sort of content that is generally available to younger audiences:

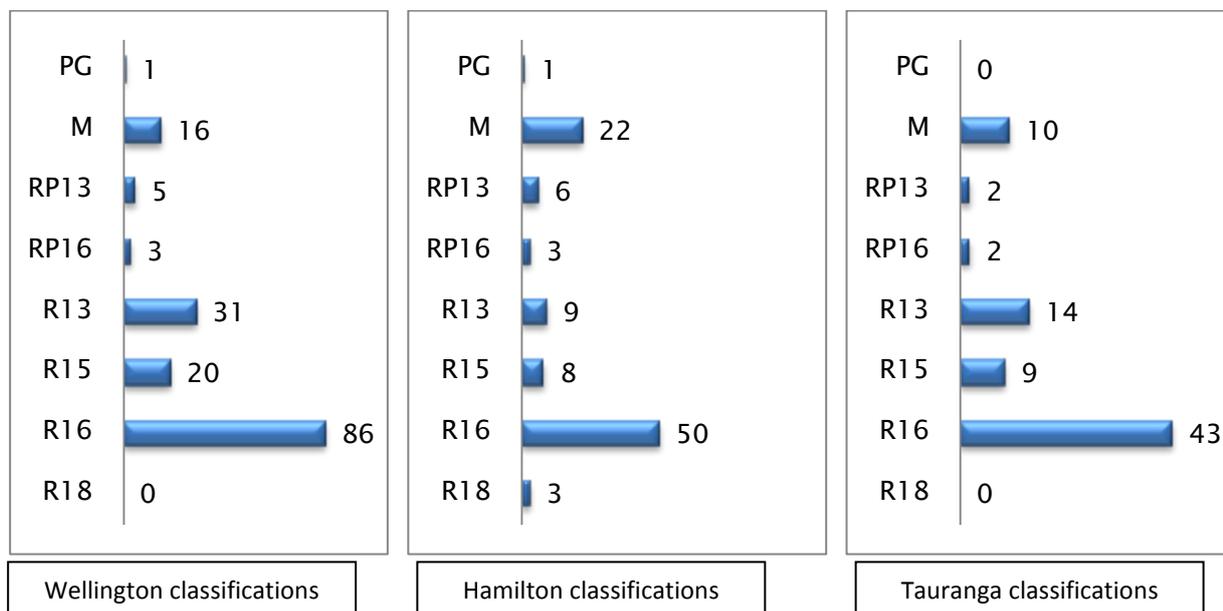
Some children will find it enjoyable (especially some kids I know find these types of movies enjoyable) but parents need to guide them. It is for the general audience.

– Student from Heretaunga College (Wellington)

The extreme violence is not morbid or done in a very malicious nature. The idea of being a hunter is already seen in more cartoons that children would watch. The battle with bad and good is a very basic narrative that preteens or teens would understand.

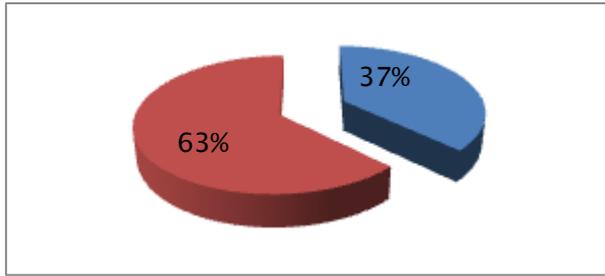
– Student from Hamilton Boys' High School

Classification by city



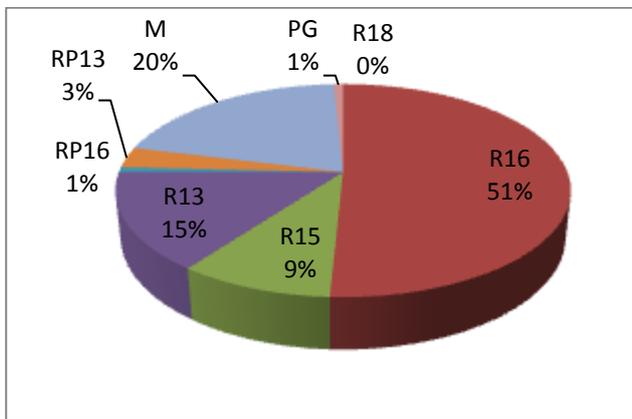
At each event, R16 was the classification chosen by most students. Students in Hamilton had the highest proportion of unrestricted classifications, with 22% classifying the film as PG or M. Tauranga students assigned the strongest restrictions, with 83% assigning an age restricted classification preventing younger people from viewing the film, even if accompanied by a parent or guardian.

Classification by gender

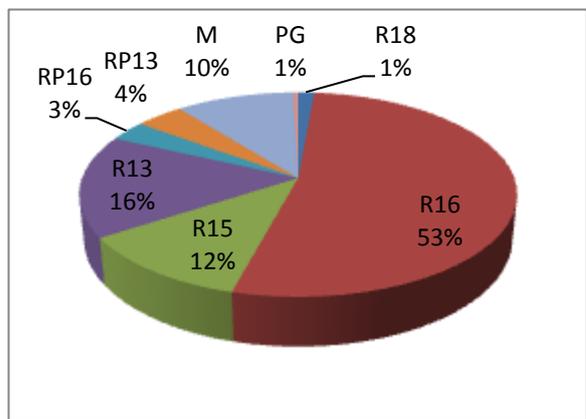


The number of female students at the Term 3 Censor for a Day events was almost double the number of male students

Overall, male and female students' classification decisions were similar, though male student favoured unrestricted classification slightly more.

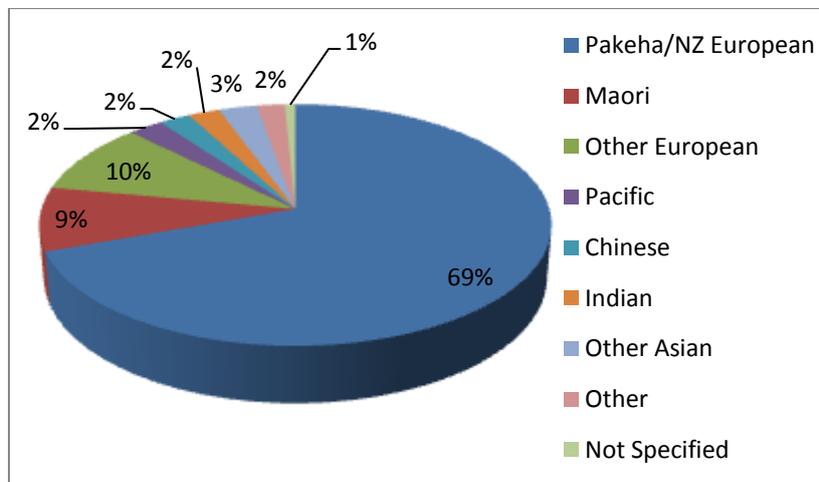


Classifications assigned by male students



Classifications assigned by female students

The majority of the students identified as Pakeha/New Zealand European, 9% identified as New Zealand Māori, 10% as non-New Zealand European, 2% as Chinese, 2% as Indian and 2% as Pacific Islanders.

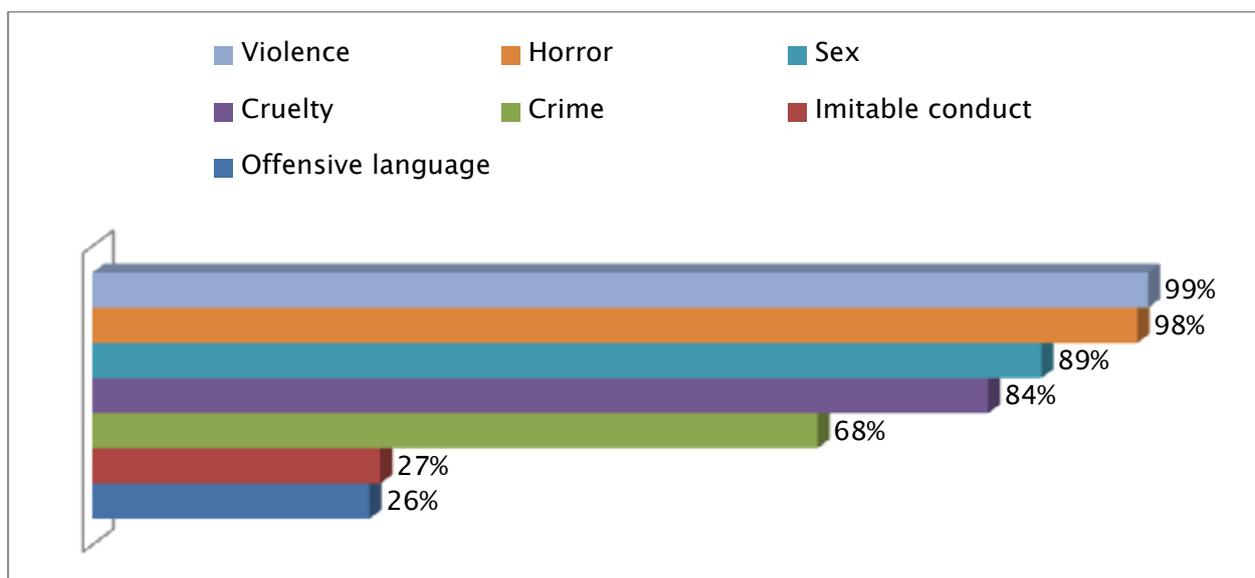




Tauranga students classifying *Abraham Lincoln Vampire Hunter* at Censor for a Day

Survey Results

Students were asked to consider whether the film contained classification criteria such as sex, horror, crime, cruelty, violence, highly offensive language, or content likely to increase the risk of young people harming themselves or others. The students were also asked to describe how this material was depicted or otherwise dealt with in the film. Almost all students agreed that *Abraham Lincoln Vampire Hunter* contained violence and horror, and most also thought the film contained matters of sex and cruelty.



Classification criteria considered by the Classification Office



Abraham kills vampires using an axe

The Classification Office restricted *Abraham Lincoln Vampire Hunter* to people 16 years and over due to its treatment of violence and horror. The majority of students agreed that these criteria were present in the film. In the summary of reasons for its classification decision, the Classification Office noted that:

The greatest impact comes from the film's presentation of horror and violence, particularly the more detailed and bloody depictions of bodily harm that are likely to greatly shock and disturb children and young teenagers. Many of the battle sequences are shot in a way that would make violence seem attractive and glamorous, and are likely to play a part in desensitisation of more impressionable children and young teenagers' attitudes to violence elsewhere. For mature viewers, the film's fictional premise and clear genre traits greatly affect the manner in which they are likely to interpret the content.

*An effect of a muted instance of implied sexual activity is unlikely to have a lasting impact. Older teenagers and adults are likely to remain conscious of the fact that the film is entirely contrived for entertainment's sake, making it significantly less likely to affect their attitudes elsewhere. Therefore *Abraham Lincoln Vampire Hunter* is classified as objectionable except if the availability is restricted to persons who have attained the age of 16 years.*

Classification criteria considered by students

Sex

A majority of students (89%) included matters of sex as part of their classification decision-making process. Sex is implied once in the film. A very brief scene near the start of the film in which Abraham walks in on a couple having sex in a bathtub was mentioned by a number of students, however most noted the brevity of the scene and concluded it was not explicit.

Some students also considered a brief instance of a man harrasing a prostitute in an alleyway to be an example of attempted rape, but said it was of a low intensity and very brief. A brief shot of a topless female body was also discussed by some students under matters of sex.

Violence

Most students (99%) said that the film contained violence, noting the number of fight sequences and killings. Interestingly, while many students considered the level of violence enough to warrant a restricted classification, many who gave the film an unrestricted classification noted the unrealistic depictions and 'action' tone of the violence. (Interestingly, some of these students said that while they were not concerned about the violence in the film, had there been more sexual content they would have restricted the film, suggesting a greater concern regarding depictions of sexual content than for violence.)

There was a large amount of violence within the film (large extent) which was depicted in detail.

– Student from Hamilton Boys' High School

A lot of violence, but the fact that the blood was the wrong colour made it more acceptable and less scary.

– Student from Onslow College (Wellington)

Cruelty

Eighty-four percent of students agreed that the film contained elements of cruelty. Students most often mentioned one (or both) of two scenes in the film: when a young boy is whipped across the face at the start of the film, and when Abraham finds himself hanging upside down amongst the bodies of other victims of the vampire he is trying to kill.

Some students also felt a chase/fight sequence which involved Abraham and one of the vampires riding and running across a stampede of horses to be an example of animal cruelty, notably when the vampire picks up one of the horses, swings it around by its leg and hurls it at Abraham.



Abraham pursues a vampire through a herd of stampeding horses

Horror



One of the vampires Abraham is assigned to hunt.

The majority of students noted the supernatural elements of the film and the at times gory violence as being 'horror'. The battles involving Abraham fighting vampires with his axe are bloody and gory, and punctuated with quick insert shots of injury such as an axe being plunged into a vampire's body or a close-up of a knife slicing a vampire's throat. There are a few fleeting stronger depictions of decapitations and impalements.

Blood and guts are shown, not really in a severe or scary manner, but still classed as 'too much' for a younger audience.

– Student from Matamata College (Tauranga)

Gruesome deaths and faces being contorted into scary faces.

– Student from Wellington High School

Lots of close-up shots of scary images. 3D made it worse, more real.

– Student from Hamilton Christian School

Crime

Just over half (68%) of the students felt that the film depicted matters of crime. While students cited examples such as murder and assault, some suggested that in the context of the film these actions were justified and were not presented in a way that would encourage audiences to copy them.

Highly offensive language

Most students did not think that the film contained highly offensive language. Interestingly, the 26% of students who did consider it as part of their classification process mentioned the singular use of the word 'whore' in the film more than the singular use of the a more contemporary expletive.

Content likely to increase the risk of young people harming themselves or others

Only 27% of students felt that some of the content in *Abraham Lincoln Vampire Hunter* could have this effect on a young audience. While many students felt that the actions in the film were too unrealistic to be imitable, some suggested that younger viewers may be encouraged to play with axes, emulating the actions of the main character.

Axe is a household item, a child might see this and try to do what Abraham did.

– Student from Sacred Heart Girls' College (Hamilton)

May cause people, especially children, to look at axes a different way, they could be more inclined to play with one.

– Student from Hamilton Boy's High School

No, because it was based on fictional creatures. And the circumstances were rare, and could not be re-enacted easily by members of the audience.

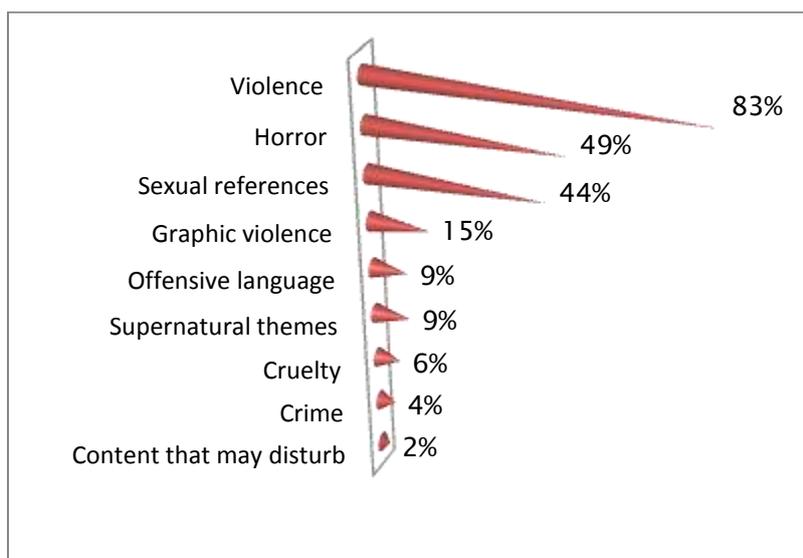
– Student from Wellington High School



An axe is Abraham's weapon of choice to kill vampires.

The Descriptive Note

Descriptive notes inform the public about content within a film which may concern them. The descriptive note for *Abraham Lincoln Vampire Hunter* informs potential audiences that the film contains 'violence and horror'. When students were asked what descriptive note they thought the film should have, most noted 'violence' (83%), followed by 'horror' (49%), and sexual references' (44%).



Audience

Students were asked who they thought was the intended or likely audience for the film. The majority of students identified teenagers and young adults as the target audience for *Abraham Lincoln Vampire Hunter*, with 25% adding that they thought the film might appeal more to males. Some students also felt that the film would appeal to people interested in horror, vampires and the supernatural.

Dominant Effect

When asked what the dominant effect on the film's likely audience would be, most students thought the film would entertain people.

Exhilaration after the adrenaline rush caused by exciting action sequences.

– Student from Hamilton Boy's High School

Merit, Value or Importance



The film ties in historical elements such as the Gettysburg address

A majority of students (59%) felt that the film had some merit. They suggested that there was some value in people seeing the depiction of significant American historical events (albeit with a supernatural element of vampires included). Students also commented on the film's messages about standing up for your beliefs, and a few noted the film's artistic merit in terms of visual effects.

Most (apart from the vampire bits) was historically informative.

– Student from Onslow College (Wellington)

One of the morals of the film is perseverance. Although a lot of people oppose you, as long as you know what is right and try to change a system, just believe and persevere to make a difference and stand for what is right.

– Student from Heretaunga College (Wellington)

Rights of man, right versus wrong, good versus evil etc, standing up for yourself/your beliefs.

– Student from Kapiti College (Wellington)

Cinematography, artistic merit.

– Student from Otumoetai College (Tauranga)

Impact of the Medium

Abraham Lincoln Vampire Hunter was screened in 3D at the Censor for a Day events. Students were asked to describe the impact of viewing the film in a 3D cinema, a 2D cinema, and on DVD.

The majority felt that the greatest impact would come from watching the film in 3D. However, not all enjoyed this and suggested the film would have been better to see in 2D – some of these students said that the 3D aspect made the action seem more unrealistic.

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Overall students said that the surround sound, darkness, large screen of the cinema would increase the intensity and enjoyment of the film compared to watching it on DVD at home.

3D: Violence and gore intensified. Blood coming out at you; 2D: Violence and gore would be less graphical, less control of how the film is watched; DVD: More control in how the film is watched, pausing playing, fast forward and volume control.

– Student from Onslow College (Wellington)

3D: Has the largest impact with blood and vampires sticking out at you in a dark place with surround sound.

– Student from Kapiti College (Wellington)

3D: Very effective, intensifies every aspect of the film, e.g. seeing the picture close to you; 2D: Better than at home as the screen is large and the sound is loud; DVD: Small TV easier to tone down the intensity and horror of the film.

– Student from Sacred Heart Girls' College (Hamilton)

3D: The horror is lessened by the 'animated' feel of 3D.

– Student from Hamilton Boys' High School

Teacher feedback

Teachers who attended Censor for a Day were encouraged to fill in a feedback form about the event. This feedback helps us ensure that the event is meeting the needs of Media Studies educators and their students.

Of the 9 teachers who filled in the feedback forms, all agreed that:

- The length of the programme was suitable
- The time slot was suitable
- The classification form was easy to follow
- The programme enhanced students understanding of film censorship
- Their school would wish to attend a similar event again
- The programme as a whole was 'very good' or 'excellent'.

Some teachers suggested some possible improvements to the programme, such as:

- Potential to be longer and more activities – maybe some more on gaming
- Look at video/computer game case studies as that is an area of interest
- An opportunity for discussion of a second potentially contentious film – reasons for rating
- Would be good to have more handouts or print out of the powerpoint
- Watch the film first then discuss the censorship criteria
- Break up the introduction as they felt the first hour was long
- Would like to have heard the rationale for classification of recent movies that the students would have seen
- Small group discussion space

Some additional comments:

- "We found it really useful and very interesting. I know my students certainly appreciated it and were really pleased that they had the opportunity to ask the Chief Censor questions."
- "Great format for the event. Effective example (*Manhunt 2*). Good choice of film. Excellent to hear from the Chief Censor."
- "A great opportunity, great venue, good choice of film."
- "It was a good film to choose and the link with *Manhunt 2* at the start made them draw parallels well."
- "Thank you for a stimulating day."

Acknowledgements

The Classification Office would like to thank 20th Century Fox Film Distribution. Without distributors' generosity in lending us a pre-release film, Censor for a Day would not be possible.

We would also like to thank the cinema managers, projectionists and caterers at Readings Courtenay, Event Cinemas Chartwell and Bay City Cinemas who provided us with excellent service and ensured the events ran smoothly.

Lastly we would like to thank the students and teachers from Wellington, Hamilton and Tauranga who made the event another success and who gave us valuable feedback in the process. We hope to see some of you at a future event!

The Classification Office is able to provide online learning modules on New Zealand's censorship system for those schools unable to attend Censor for Day. If you would like to arrange a session for your school, please contact the Classification Office on 0508 CENSOR (0508 236 767) or at information@censorship.govt.nz.



Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter.