



OFFICE OF FILM
& LITERATURE
CLASSIFICATION

Te Tari Whakarōpū Tukuata, Tubitubinga

Happy Feet Introduction

On 15 January 2007, the Chief Censor directed the Secretary for Internal Affairs to obtain and submit a copy of the film *Happy Feet* to the Office of Film and Literature Classification to be classified.

Happy Feet is an animated film. Its story centres around a young Emperor penguin named Mambo, who is different than the rest of his community because they all sing to express themselves and to find a mate, while he has a poor singing voice and dances instead. He is shunned and blamed for the lack of fish supplies which threatens the community with starvation. He is driven out of the community by the elders and goes in search of the humans, who he believes have the answer to the food shortage. The feature follows him on his adventures, his discovery of the huge fishing ships who are catching all the fish, and his captivity in an aquarium. He attempts to communicate with the humans to tell them they are taking all the fish, eventually impressing them with his ability to dance and leading them back to his community with a homing device strapped to his back. As a result, he is welcomed back by the other penguins and is allowed to be with Gloria, his penguin love. The humans set up a marine

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reserve in Antarctic waters and there is plenty of fish for all.

This film won the 2007 Academy Award for Best Animated Film. The voices of the principal animated characters are dubbed in by well known Hollywood actors. Typical of other films in this genre of children’s animated features, the characters are anthropomorphised animals and birds, whose behaviour, speech, emotions and motivations are all those of humans.

The film originally carried a G 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. However the film was rated PG in its country of origin and the equivalent of PG in Ontario, Singapore, Switzerland and the Netherlands for its scenes of danger and sexual innuendo. In his reasons for determining that the film should be examined by the Office, the Chief Censor stated that:

“A member of the public has complained about the film’s G rating and absence of descriptive note to the Classification Office. I am consequently concerned that the rating assigned to this film may not accurately reflect its content under New Zealand law.”



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There are several low-level verbal references of a sexual nature that are likely to be incomprehensible to younger viewers. These are added, presumably, as part of the feature's attempt to provide dual appeal for young children and adults. There are also images that are frightening and disturbing due to their sudden impact in visual and aural terms and the threat of violence to central and sympathetic characters. These elements have the effect of making the natural world seem at times a threatening and violence place, and the entrance of humans into that world as overwhelming, destructive and 'alien'. Some of these depictions will disturb, sadden and upset very young children.

There are two particularly frightening sequences which create the same sudden fright, increase of tension and release of tension in the viewer as can be found in countless horror movies. In the first, Mambo is attacked by a leopard seal, who chases him through the water snapping at him with huge jaws full of sharp teeth. Mambo manages to get up onto some thin ice and the seal can be seen swimming below him, eventually leaping up and flipping Mambo back into the water in an attempt to eat him. In a second frightening scene Killer Whales are making sport of tossing the penguins up into the air and holding them in their huge mouths when the massive prow of an icebreaker suddenly drives through the ice just next to the

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- Letter from complainant.*

“The film dealt with some serious and sometimes upsetting themes for children. However, the cute and cuddly aspects of the anthropomorphised penguins and the frequent use of humour means that these elements have a reduced impact and are therefore suitable for viewing by a wide range of ages.”

- Office of Film and Literature Classification Decision.

penguins. This is a loud and shocking image and is likely to disturb and upset young children. When Mambo is later incarcerated in the aquarium and becomes depressed and hallucinates, young children are also likely to be disturbed.

The Office received two complaints from members of the public who had taken children to see *Happy Feet* and who felt the G rating was not appropriate as their children were very frightened by the film.

“G’ rating it may be, suitable for all ages it most definitely is not. I do not consider my grandchildren overly sensitive kids and have heard from other mothers that they have left the same movie also. Warnings often accompany an adult movie about bad language, sex, violence, etc. I would suggest that some-one needs to have a look at the standard for rating kids movies and whether a warning needs to be attached to some of these for a younger audience.” -Email from complainant.

“Going to the cinema is a huge treat in my house, and I am careful to only go to something I am sure is going to be suitable for my son. I therefore rely on the rating system, the previews, the advertising and where possible feedback...all the advertising and previews had led me and my son to believe this would be a fun movie. I feel completely misled and betrayed by the advertising and the



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“G” rating applied to this film.” - Email from complainant.

In its decision, the Office considered the dominant effect of the publication as a whole and determined that in this case, the dominant effect was that of an animated children’s film designed to highlight aspects of the Emperor Penguin’s Antarctic environment and human’s responsibility for conservation of that environment. The film was intended for a wide audience and was designed to amuse both adults and children alike. Some of the messages in the feature were likely to be confusing for younger children and may require parental guidance.

The film dealt with some serious and sometimes upsetting themes for children. However, the cute and cuddly aspects of the anthropomorphised penguins and the frequent use of humour means that these elements have a reduced impact and are therefore suitable for viewing by a wide range of ages. Nevertheless, these elements were such that younger viewers would benefit from parental guidance.

The Office classified the film as unrestricted with parental guidance recommended for younger viewers (PG), with the descriptive note “some scenes may scare very young children”.

Questions

- 1) What is the difference between a G rating and a PG rating?
- 2) Do you think it is important for young children to have parental guidance when watching a film? Why?
- 3) The complaints mentioned the advertising for this film. What are some examples of expectations created by film advertising? Can you think of any other examples of film advertising that could be considered misleading?