



OFFICE OF FILM  
& LITERATURE  
CLASSIFICATION

*Te Tari Whakarōpū Tukuata, Tuhituhinga*

## The Passion of the Christ

In the early part of 2004 the Office of Film and Literature Classification was inundated with letters of complaint and support over two decisions. The first of these was the decision, just before Christmas 2003, to ban the computer game *Manhunt*. The second was the decision to classify Mel Gibson's film *The Passion of the Christ* as R16 with the note "Brutal violence, torture and cruelty".

Even before the film arrived in New Zealand the Office received inquiries about how it would be classified. Some church groups expressed an interest in helping classify the film, others expressed the opinion that a secular government-funded office would be anti-Christian and thus shouldn't be allowed to classify it.

After the film was submitted to the Office on 16 February 2004, it was viewed by 6 members of the Classification Office. As usual, one of the classification officers had responsibility for examining the film, taking notes on what happened in it and writing up the decision. Since it was expected that the classification decision on the film would excite controversy whatever classification it was assigned, the Chief Censor and Deputy Chief Censor attended, as did two of the senior classification officers. A member of the Information Unit who was studying Christian theology also came to provide some expertise on the story.

["If this was a Muslim, Buddhist or Hindi film, I wonder if you would have been so restrictive."](#)

[Email from a member of the public](#)

After watching the film, the group discussed it for several hours. It was unanimously agreed to be a very violent film, particularly unusual in the way in which the violence was focussed on only one person, and in great detail. You can read the path the discussion followed in the Written Decision under Section 12.

It was decided to hold a public consultation to gauge the reaction of a diverse group of Christians and members of other faiths. The distributor, Hoyts, was planning a preview session for ministers and priests, so the Office asked if a questionnaire could be distributed to those who attended. About 80 people filled out the form, and from those, the Chief Censor interviewed five to get a more detailed response. You can read these interviews in the Record of Assistance.

Writing up the decision, doing research on the story as presented in the film, and finalising the classification and descriptive note took another few days. The decision was registered and given to the distributor on 20 February and then made public.

["My basic point is that no-one should commercially profit from the sacred gospel message, particularly by scenes \(described by TIME magazine\) as 'near pornographic feats of flayed flesh'. Although the suffering of Christ can not even be fully represented by Mel Gibson's gory portrayal, this suffering was for sinners thirsty for righteousness, not for those seeking commercial profit or perverted gratification at violence."](#)

[Email from a member of the public](#)

["This is one film that addresses violence in a positive manner and puts it in its proper place."](#)

[Email from a member of the public](#)

There was a flood of inquiries and complaints to the Office following the publication of the decision. Because of the religious nature of the film, the Office could not answer many of these in a way that was meaningful to the correspondents. Most of the correspondence was about the religious aspects of the film (some of which have been reproduced in the boxes on these pages). People wanted the film banned for a number of reasons which have no



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place in the classification process – that it was inaccurate, that it was unorthodox, or that certain scenes had been invented to conform to a Roman Catholic point of view. Jewish correspondents were worried that it might incite hatred towards Jews. While most Christian complainants felt that the classification was too high, others complained that the film was too violent, and should have a higher classification. It is worth noting that a large number of people wrote in supporting the decision, as well.

The distributor, Hoyts, decided to ask for a review of the film. The law does not allow for the classification itself to be reviewed. Instead, the Film and Literature Board of Review examines the film as if the film had not been previously classified by the Office. The Board viewed the film in early March, and received written and spoken submissions from interested parties. The submissions are summarised in the Board's full decision, and you can also read the full submissions from Hoyts, the Office, and the Society for the Promotion of Community Standards.

On 5 April, just in time for Holy Week, the President of the Board issued the Board's decision, which lowered the restriction one year to R15, with a descriptive note "Prolonged sequences of brutal violence, torture and cruelty". This is the classification the film carries on any video or DVD.

## Questions

1. What matters under section 3(1) of the Films, Videos, and Publications Classification Act 1993 are noted in the original decision of the Office?
2. What matters under section 3(3) of the Act are noted in the original decision of the Office?
3. What matters are discussed in the Board of Review's decision? (You will need to go to page 30 of the Board's decision.)
4. Why did the Board of Review decide to drop the classification one year? Do you think it makes a difference?
5. The Office's submission to the Board said "A classification below 16 would set a new benchmark for depictions of violence permitted in films on general release exceeding that established by *Saving Private Ryan*. A classification below 16 could also be seen to privilege one religion ahead of others on the basis that the film's depictions are historically accurate, a basis that is in fact contested. In this instance a classification of 16 or 18 represents minimum interference with the freedom of expression consistent with preventing injury to the public good".  
Think about other violent films you have seen. What do you think about the depiction of violence in this film? Does the subject of the film lessen the impact of the violence?
6. There were a number of submissions summarised in the Board's decision. Who argued for what, and why?

"It amazes me that our children have had unlimited access to the Harry Potter films – which are blatantly advocating and progressively training people in witchcraft, that they can watch soaps on T.V. that promote uncommitted relationships and sexually perverted lifestyles regularly, and yet *The Passion* which is based on a historical fact is given an R16 rating? As a parent I want my children to see what Jesus did for each of us – graphic violence or not."

Fax from a pastor