



OFFICE OF FILM
& LITERATURE
CLASSIFICATION

Te Tari Whakarōpū Tukuata, Tūbitūbinga

Saving Private Ryan **Introduction**

The film *Saving Private Ryan* generated much debate at the time of its classification, and ultimately became benchmark for New Zealand film classification. The film was submitted to the Office of Film and Literature Classification on 17 September, 1998.

The film follows a group of American soldiers in World War Two, assigned to locate and bring back Private James Ryan, who is fighting somewhere in the French countryside. Private Ryan's three brothers have all been killed in the war and military officials have decided that his mother should be spared the death of her fourth son. A group of approximately eight men search for Ryan, encountering various incidents along the way resulting in the death of most of the men.

The film presents very strong depictions of the infliction of serious physical harm. Such presentations are lengthy, frequent, and of a very graphic nature. The most notable of these is the one that occurs at the opening of the film. The feature itself is an extended flashback of an old man visiting a military cemetery. The flashback

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begins with the US forces landing at Omaha Beach on "D-Day" in June 1944. The camera follows Captain Miller, played by Tom Hanks, as he and his troops advance up the beach and into enemy battlements. The scene, which lasts for approximately 25 minutes, is very graphic and realistic in terms of its portrayal of the horrors of war, particularly the resulting injuries and fatalities.

The horrors of war are presented in a very graphic and realistic manner as the men are massacred by enemy fire. Everywhere men are depicted dead or dying. The injuries are horrific. Particularly memorable are images of a man holding onto his arm which has been blown off, a man who is still alive lying on the ground with his entrails spilling out, and a man dragging an injured man up the beach and then turning to see that the man's legs have been blown off. Further horrific scenes of war are repeated at regular intervals throughout the feature. These impact of these subsequent scenes is particularly heightened as they involve characters that the viewer has come to know. Scenes such as this present the emotional and heart wrenching side of war. The feature ends with a battle scene similar in length to that of the opening scene. Acts of significant cruelty are also presented within the context of scenes of war. Such presentations are at times unable to be separated from the scenes of war within which they occur.



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In its classification decision the Office concluded that the film had significant social and educational merit in that it provided a frank and horrifying look into the harsh and brutal reality of war:

“Such presentations are thought-provoking and are considered likely to engender discussion and debate amongst viewers. The way in which the film presents war is quite different to traditional presentations which have had a tendency to glamorise and glorify the experience...In view of the extent and degree of the violence, but bearing in mind the social and educational merit associated with this film, the Classification Office finds that the availability of the film is likely to be injurious to the public good unless its viewing is restricted to a mature audience.”

The Office classified the film *Saving Private Ryan* as R16 with the descriptive note “depicts graphic and realistic war scenes”.

On 23 October 1998, the film’s distributor, United International Pictures, appealed the Office’s classification to the Film and Literature Board of Review. Any person who is dissatisfied with a decision of the Office may seek a review of the publication by the Film and Literature Board of Review. The Board of Review does not review the Office’s decision. It must conduct its review

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- Office of Film and Literature Classification Decision.

of the publication without regard to the Office’s decision. You can read more about the Board on the Office website at http://www.censorship.govt.nz/censorship_system.html.

The Board viewed the film and considered the written and oral submissions made by the Office and by the film distributor.

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- Film and Literature Board of Review Decision.

“Given the time elapsed since World War II, it is probable that parents or guardians of ‘younger secondary school pupils’ would themselves have limited knowledge or experience of war. They may be unable to provide their children with a suitable context for the ‘frank and horrifying look into the harsh and brutal reality of war’ which Saving Private Ryan portrays.”

- Office of Film and Literature Classification letter to the Board, 9 December 1998.



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The Board was satisfied that the violence portrayed in the film is an honest and genuine attempt to convey both the horror of war and the enormous sacrifice made by a generation of young men and women. This sets the film apart from other films that may show significant violence. The Board was of the view that the public good would be served by making the film as widely available as possible, but not to audiences who could be adversely affected by the portrayals of violence, audiences such as those upon whom the educational and historical benefits of the film would be overwhelmed or subsumed by the power and emotional impact of the scenes of violence. The Board was of the view that the public good would be injured if this film were made available to persons under 15 years of age who are likely to be both insufficiently emotionally equipped to cope with the depictions of violence and not as knowledgeable about the historical context in which events in the film take place.

The Board gave *Saving Private Ryan* the classification of R15 with the descriptive note “depicts graphic and realistic war scenes”.

The Office regarded this film as establishing a new benchmark for depictions of violence permitted in films on general release. In their submission to the Board of Review, the Office noted that: *“...the graphic nature and extent of the scenes of violence warranted restriction, and a higher restriction may have been necessary were it not for the balancing strength of the depiction with the matters under section 3(4)”*.

The film was released in New Zealand cinemas on October 22 1998, with the Office of Film and Literature Classification’s original classification of R16. Following the decision of the Film and Literature Board of Review, the classification was dropped to R15 on December 11 1998, allowing those 15 year olds who had previously been prevented from seeing the film to now view it.

Questions

- 1) What matters under section 3(4) did the Office take into consideration when classifying *Saving Private Ryan*?
- 2) In the Office’s decision, *Saving Private Ryan* is compared to other war films. Can you think of an example of another film that could be considered as violent as this one, but presents the violence in a different way? How does it present the violence? What classification does your example have?
- 3) Compare the decisions from the Office and the Board of Review. What are the differences?