

Film commission aims to clear up royal mess

In Switzerland film ratings are left to the country's 26 cantons, with the result that in Geneva seven-year-olds can watch Colin Firth as a stammering George VI, but in Basel you have to be nine, in Bern ten – in both cases 12 if unaccompanied by an adult – and in Zurich no one under 12 is getting in at all (see box).

Fed up with what they consider an unnecessary confusion, ProCinema, the national association of cinema owners and film distributors, and the Swiss Video Association are behind the creation of a national film commission – set to open for business on July 1 – which will issue a one-age-fits-all rating across the country.

“Switzerland is too small for different ratings,” René Gerber, head of ProCinema, told swissinfo.ch. “There are other examples where the difference between cantons is bigger.”

In practice, there are five commissions – comprising members of police or education departments – for fixing age limits: in Geneva, Vaud, Zurich, Basel and Ticino. Smaller cantons generally follow their examples, although they are free to set their own ratings.

One exception is the Swiss capital Bern, where cinema owners set their own age limits – although this means they also accept responsibility if parents complain that their child needed five years of therapy after watching an unsuitable film.

“If you're a distributor, currently you have to screen your movie in all these cantons that have commissions – so you screen it five times. If we had one commission, you'd have to screen it once. So it will be cheaper for the distributors,” Gerber said.

German ratings

The plan is for films in German (spoken by two-thirds of Swiss) and English to “import” the ratings given in Germany (0, 6, 12, 16, 18). Films in French or Italian will need to be watched by the new commission – or cantons could let distributors come up with an age.

“Take the example of a Harry Potter movie. We’ll take the age from the FSK [the German ratings organisation] and suggest it to the commission,” Gerber explained.

“If the commission thinks that’s OK, then that’s the rating that will be used in Switzerland. If the commission says no, it can still demand to see the movie and make another rating.”

Negatives

The reforms, which have been negotiated for five years, have nevertheless triggered concerns in French-speaking cantons.

Geneva dug its heels in for a long time but eventually gave in. Vaud is fighting on and threatens to kibosh the July launch of the national commission.

“The project under discussion is a step back,” Vaud senator Anne-Catherine Lyon told swissinfo.ch.

“Many films – notably everything produced in French – appear in cinemas in the French-speaking part of the country before being shown in Germany.”

She said the main point on which canton Vaud insisted was that such films be “systematically viewed” by the national commission and not left to the assessment of distributors, as planned.

However, this demand has been rejected by the Conference of Cantonal Police and Justice Directors, which in November gave the green light to the national film commission, because it was believed this would be too time-consuming.

“The project amounts to giving distributors the responsibility for fixing the legal ages for the majority of films in French-speaking Switzerland,” Lyon said.

Reel progress?

But most people involved with films welcomed the move.

“As film distributors, we’re faced with very peculiar situations,” Paul Fischli, marketing director for Universal Pictures in Switzerland, told swissinfo.ch.

“In a canton with a more progressive education department – in Geneva for example – a film can receive a 6 rating, whereas in other areas you have to be 12 or 14. Coordinating things on a supracantonal level would make life easier for the cinema-going public and everybody else.”

One option for distributors is to bypass the commissions entirely and receive an automatic 16 rating. But Fischli describes this from a commercial point of view as “quite an issue”.

Distributors can appeal, but that takes time and money and while the result can often go their way – a lower rating – it can also lead to an unwanted higher rating.

Tougher on violence

Then there’s the issue of different countries, different sensibilities. Italy for example ordered Bertolucci’s *Last Tango in Paris* (1972) to be burnt (see box for censorship in Switzerland).

“In the United States sex is much more of a ratings issue than violence, and here it’s a bit vice versa,” Fischli said.

“People here are a bit more sensitive to violence shown in a subdued context which can still have an impact on children.”

He explained it was here that commissions tended to be a bit stricter.

“What American audiences are more familiar with in family movies can be quite harsh for European kid audiences,” he said.

Recommended age

To help parents decide what is suitable for their children, Geneva and Vaud currently give two ratings to films: legal and recommended.

The King's Speech for example is 7/12, meaning seven-year-olds will be admitted, but in the commission's view one should be at least 12 to understand and appreciate the film.

For example FilmAges, the website of the film commissions of Geneva and Vaud, says in its judgement of The King's Speech that "being plunged into the historical context of England in the 1930s demands a certain level of interest and knowledge".

Another concern of the French-speaking cantons is that the new system will do away with these dual ratings.

"It is one of the questions that canton Vaud has," René Gerber admitted, giving the example of a documentary about Swiss writer Max Frisch which was rated 7/16.

He said the option of supplying consumer advice along with a rating – as in Britain, where cinemagoers were memorably told that a Harry Potter film "contains fantasy spiders" – hadn't been discussed.