



How Culture Influences Film: *Comparing the American and German Film Rating Systems*

Abstract:

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Throughout this research project, I will examine various aspects of the American and German film rating systems and how the culture of each country influences film ratings. My research focuses specifically on how the *Freiwillige Selbstkontrolle der Filmwirtschaft* (FSK), a rating committee in Germany, and the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), the American counterpart to the FSK, rates films comparatively. Although the two committees often rate films similarly, there are multiple cultural influences that effect what rating films are given. The most common and prominent discrepancy between the FSK and MPAA explicitly is how they rate sexual content and violent content. I intend to delve into how culture influences these rating committees and examine the cultural differences between America and Germany through film.

Abstract in German:

In diesem Forschungsprojekt untersuche ich verschiedene Aspekte von dem amerikanischen und deutschen Film-Ratings System. Genauer gesagt untersuche ich, wie die Kultur von diesen Ländern diese Film-Ratings beeinflusst. Meine Forschung untersucht speziell, wie die Freiwillige Selbstkontrolle der Filmwirtschaft (FSK), eine deutscher Film-Rating Ausschuss, und die *Motion Picture Association of America* (MPAA), das amerikanische Äquivalent, Filme bewerten. Obwohl diese beiden Organisationen oft das gleiche Rating für denselben Film ausgegeben haben, gibt es kulturelle Einflüsse, die beeinflussen, wie ein Film bewertet wird. Vor allem haben die FSK und MPAA verschiedene Ratings gegeben, besonders wenn Filme starke sexuelle oder gewalttätige Inhalte haben. Ich möchte anhand von Filmen untersuchen, wie Kultur diese Rating-Ausschüsse beeinflusst und kulturelle Unterschiede zwischen Amerika und Deutschland zum Ausdruck bringt.

Thesis:

Throughout this research project, I will explain the specifications of each rating from each association (MPAA and FSK) and specific differences and similarities between the American and German film rating systems by comparing the MPAA and FSK ratings of the same film. Additionally, I will discuss how culture impacts film ratings and the decisions of the rating committees, and the various ways films may be adapted.

Same Film, Different Rating

How do film ratings compare between America and Germany? Below, I will discuss a few films and how they received their rating in each country. The factors that are taken into account are similar for both the MPAA and FSK, however; each place a higher rating based on different content.

Blue is the Warmest Color is a 2013 French film by director Abdellatif Kechiche, which won a variety of awards. The film includes a multitude of risqué adult content involving multiple explicit sex scenes.



The film received an NC-17 rating from the MPAA because of the explicit sexual content. The MPAA feels very strongly about what age viewers should be to see sexual content, and how much sexual content can be shown to viewers of different ages. Most NC-17 rated films are only screened in select theaters, and most films release an R-rated version of the film so more viewers can see the film. In the case of *Blue is the Warmest Color*, it was only screened in select movie theaters in New York City and Los Angeles when it was first released before gradually expanding to other select locations. There is no lower-rated version of the film available because the movie's story and message are dependent on the explicit scenes.

In Germany, the film received an FSK 16 rating because explicit sexual content is not as big of an issue for younger viewers. The film was screened in movie theaters, but required viewers to present a valid ID. This is common in German movie theaters to ensure movie-goers are old enough to view the films.



Kill Bill Vol. 1 and 2



Kill Bill Volumes I and II came out in 2003 and 2004 from director Quentin Tarantino. Both feature graphic violence and strong language throughout, earning them an R rating from the MPAA. The MPAA is more relaxed when it comes to violence in films, and more likely to give a lower rating based on violent content.

In Germany, the film received an FSK 18 rating because of this excessive violence. The rating committee feels very strongly about what age viewers should be to view violence, and how much violence can be shown to viewers of different ages. Both *Kill Bill* films feature extremely graphic and violent scenes, and that is why the rating committee gave the films the highest possible age rating.

Sources:

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An Explanation of Each Rating from the MPAA and FSK

Motion Picture Association of America Ratings



Ages 18 and Older Admitted, no one younger is permitted

Films with this rating are rarely shown in regular movie theaters. The MPAA determined films with this rating contain explicit content that cannot be shown to people 17 and younger. If a film receives this rating, often they release an R rated version that does not include as much explicit content so the film can be viewed in theaters.



Ages 17 and Older Admitted, younger people are permitted with parental supervision

May include very strong language, explicit violence, explicit nudity and sexual relationships, and drug use.



Ages 13 and Older Admitted, younger people are permitted with parental supervision

May include some nudity, sex, drug use and strong language. Intense violence without showing blood is also allowed.



All Ages Admitted

May include a few thematic elements, strong language, nudity, sex or sexual relationships, or any other content that may be considered slightly more inappropriate for children. Drug usage is specifically not allowed, unless for an anti-drug message.



All Ages Admitted

No thematic elements, strong language, nudity, sex or sexual relationships, violence, or any other content that would be considered inappropriate for children.

Freiwillige Selbstkontrolle der Filmwirtschaft Ratings



Ages 18 and Older Admitted

Often films that receive this rating have explicitly adult content. To ensure that no one younger than 18 can view these films, the FSK will only allow the film to be viewed in a theater with no DVD release. If a film with this rating is allowed to have a DVD released, there is not enough explicitly adult content to censor from younger viewers.



Ages 16 and Older Admitted

More "adult" thematic content is allowed. Hard and brutal violence is allowed for horror films, but bloody and brutal violence in action films is not allowed. There are almost no restrictions for sex scenes, with explicit non-censored sex being allowed. Detailed drug use is allowed, as long as it is not shown in a positive light.



Ages 12 and Older Admitted

Allowed to show more "problematic" thematic elements. More explicit violence is allowed. Excessive alcohol, drug, and tobacco use is also allowed, so long as it is not set in a positive light. Scantily clad women and non-explicit sex scenes are also allowed, as well as strong language and explicit sexual dialogue.



Ages 6 and Older Admitted

Does not include any "problematic" thematic elements. Realistic violence or strong fantastical violence is often not allowed, as well as drug, alcohol, and tobacco use. Films with this rating can show drug, alcohol, and tobacco use if it is not glorified. Some nudity and sex is allowed, but sex scenes are only allowed to show people topless, and implied fellatio and anal sex is accepted.



All Ages Admitted

Equivalent to MPAA 'G' rating. No thematic elements, strong language, nudity, sex or sexual relationships, violence, or any other content that would be considered inappropriate for children.

Culture and its Effect on Film Ratings

American and German cultures are very similar, however; a huge difference is how violence and sexual content is viewed and received by audiences. This is represented within the MPAA and FSK ratings, as violent content is rated for an older audience in Germany and sexual content for a younger audience, and the opposite is true in America. This discrepancy can be seen particularly well in Todd Phillips' 2009 film *The Hangover*.



The FSK rated the film *FSK ab 12*, meaning ages 12 and older were admitted to see the film in theaters. In America, however; the MPAA gave the film an R rating, allowing ages 17 and older to be admitted to see the film in theaters. The MPAA determined the film's rating due to the strong language, sexual content with nudity, and drug use. The FSK observed these same qualities, however deemed the film appropriate for a significantly younger audience.

The Hangover



How Films May Be Adapted:

When the FSK receives a film that they want to make more accessible for a larger audience, they may adapt certain aspects of the film, so it is appropriate for a younger viewers. The most common changes made are a slight rewrite of the films' script for the final dubbed version and cutting portions of or entire scenes from the final version.



An example of this can be heard in Chris Columbus's 2002 film *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. The film received an "FSK ab 6" rating, but to make the film appropriate for the younger viewers, a scene of the film was cut significantly and a line of dialogue was changed. The fight scene within the Chamber of Secrets was deemed too gruesome for younger viewers and shortened by about two minutes. Harry Potter's line "I'll kill you!" directed at Tom Riddle, was also determined to be too dark for the younger audience members. To change the overall tone of the scene, the line was changed to "I'll fight you!"

Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets



Historical Film Censorship in Germany

The classic film *Casablanca* was released in the United States in 1942, during World War II. The film was later released after the war in West Germany, but with almost entirely as a different film. The original version released in the US was a World War II story of romance and sacrifice, which was blatantly anti-Nazi. When the film was released in Germany, Germans were reluctant to talk and hear about Nazism, and the government and cultural organizations were cautious. The FSK did not want to have any content that would be a reminder of the recent war, therefore Warner Bros. deleted all scenes with Nazis and almost all mention of war so the film was able to be released in Germany. Almost the entire script was changed for the first dubbed version.



Casablanca



From characters to the entire film plot, the German version of the film was a completely different movie from the original. The resistance fighter Victor Laszlo became Victor Larsen, a Norwegian atomic physicist. Originally Laszlo had escaped from a concentration camp, but in the German version the physicist had discovered mysterious delta rays and was on the run from Interpol after breaking out of jail. The German version did well at the box office, but received lukewarm reviews from critics. The German viewers just considered the film another Warner Bros. picture that starred Ingrid Bergman.

Since the initial release of the film, Germany has openly confronted the topic of World War II in schools, public memorials, and laws. It took until 1975 for there to be a re-release of *Casablanca* with dubbing that matched the original film.

Conclusion:

In this project, I described the specifications of ratings from each association (MPAA and FSK). I investigated a variety of ways culture impacts film ratings and the decisions of the rating committees. This can be seen in the *Same Film, Different Rating*, *Culture and its Effect on Film Ratings*, and *Historical Film Censorship in Germany*. I also examined specific differences and similarities between the American and German film rating systems by comparing the MPAA and FSK ratings. This can be seen in the *Same Film, Different Rating* section of the poster. Additionally, I explored the various ways films are adapted, whether it be an adjustment to fit a specific rating or to avoid a national taboo topic. This can be seen in the *How Films May Be Adapted* and *Historical Film Censorship in Germany* sections of the poster.