



OFFICE OF FILM
& LITERATURE
CLASSIFICATION

Te Tari Whakarōpū Tukuata, Tubituhinga

The Last House on the Left

Report of a public consultation held on 8 October 2009

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1 Introduction

The Office of Film and Literature Classification (Classification Office) sought the views of members of the public on the classification of the film *The Last House on the Left* (2009).

2.1 Recruitment

Consumer Link, a research data collection and data processing organisation offering a recruitment service for qualitative research, contacted 51 people, aged 18 and over and broadly representative of the New Zealand population, who participated in the consultation.

2.2 The consultation process

The film was shown to 51 members of the public in the theatre at the Classification Office. The consultation was held on 8 October 2009 commencing at 5.45pm and finishing at 9.20pm.

During the recruitment process, participants were told:

The film may disturb as it contains strong violence and sexual violence. If, in the normal course of your life, you would find such content difficult to view, please do not accept this invitation to participate. The Classification Office must consider films as a whole and members of the public who assist the Office to form an opinion about the classification of a film must do their best to watch the whole thing and be prepared to contribute to the discussion afterward.

Prior to the screening, the Chief Censor explained the relevant provisions of the Films, Videos, and Publications Classification Act 1993.

At the conclusion of his talk, the Chief Censor offered participants the opportunity to leave the theatre if the film upset them. Staff were available to assist them if they did so.

The film was then shown. After the screening and a short refreshment break, participants were given a questionnaire to complete. The questionnaire asked:

- what classification would you recommend?
- what cuts would you want made, if any, and would the classification change as a result?
- what content in the film made you recommend the classification you chose?
- what harm could occur if the film were shown in breach of the classification recommended?

After completing the questionnaire, participants were invited to discuss the film, its classification and the consultation process.

2.3 The film

The Last House on the Left is a thriller/suspense film which also broadly fits within the horror genre. It is a re-imagining of the original version released in the USA in 1972.

The 1972 version of *The Last House on the Left* was part of a wave of films challenging the boundaries of audience taste and endurance in terms of its presentation of violence, including sexual violence. Consequently, the film has a history of being banned or heavily cut in many countries, including New Zealand. The feature has twice been classified in New Zealand as a video recording. The Chief Censor of Films classified a cinematic version as approved for "Exhibition only to persons 16 years of age and over", with the note "Content may offend". This decision was dated 8th June 1987. In a decision dated 20 July 1988 the Video Recordings Authority classified another version of the feature as "Indecent" due to its treatment of sex, crime, cruelty and violence, and in 2004, a longer version on DVD was classified by this Office as "R18 contains violence and sexual violence".

The film under consideration is based on the original. It is not a re-edit of the 1972 versions like those discussed above.

Synopsis – *The Last House on the Left* (2009)

After settling their affairs, Emma, John, and Mari Collingwood go on vacation to their lake house. Shortly after arriving, Mari borrows the family car and drives into town to spend time with her friend Paige. While Paige works the cash register at a local store, she and Mari meet Justin, a teenager passing through the town who invites them both back to his hotel room to smoke some weed. While the three are hanging out in the hotel room, Krug, Justin's father, Francis, Justin's uncle, and Sadie, Krug's girlfriend, arrive.

Krug shows Justin a local newspaper that has Krug's and Sadie's pictures on the front page, which explains how Sadie and Francis broke Krug out of police custody and killed the two officers that were transporting him. Believing it too risky to let Paige and Mari go, Krug kidnaps them and uses their vehicle to leave town. While Krug searches for the highway, Mari convinces him to take a road that leads him to her parents lake house; Mari then attempts to jump out of the vehicle, but the ensuing fight amongst all the passengers causes Krug to crash into a tree. Frustrated by Mari's attempts to escape, Sadie and Francis proceed to beat Mari as she crawls away from the wreckage. Krug attempts to teach his son to "be a man" by forcing him to fondle Mari's breasts. When Justin refuses Krug decides to rape Mari. Paige begins insulting him to get him to stop, which causes Krug to pause momentarily only to stab Paige in the stomach twice. As Mari watches Paige bleed to death she is raped by Krug. Afterward, Mari musters enough strength to escape the group and make it to the lake so that she can swim to safety. Before she can swim far enough, Krug shoots her in the back, leaving her to bleed out in the lake.

A storm forces Krug and his gang to seek refuge with John and Emma, whose home is nearby. Justin realizes that they are Mari's parents, and intentionally leaves a necklace Mari was wearing on the counter to alert them about their daughter. When John and Emma find Mari, barely alive, on their porch, along with the necklace from the counter, they realize that the people who did this to Mari are in their home. As they try and find the key to their boat, so that they can take Mari to the hospital, they decide to get revenge on those responsible. When Francis happens upon Mari's body he is attacked and killed by John and Emma. When the couple go after Krug and Sadie they find Justin in possession of Krug's gun; Justin gives the gun to John so he can kill Krug. Sadie awakens and interrupts John, allowing Krug the chance to escape the couple where he pieces together that they are Mari's parents. After Emma shoots Sadie in the head, John runs after Krug. With a combined effort from Emma, John and Justin, Krug is knocked unconscious. John paralyzes Krug from the neck down, and leaves him to die with his head in an active microwave; then he, Emma, Mari, and Justin take the boat to the local hospital. (from www.imdb.com).

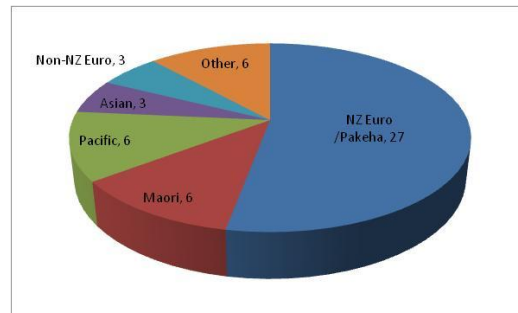
2 The Participants

Fifty-one people attended the consultation and all returned completed questionnaires. No-one left during the screening. One person left before the discussion.

The questionnaire was completed by 26 men and 25 women. There was a spread of ages from 19 to 73 years.

Age	
18-30	18
31-50	25
51+	8
TOTAL	51

Just over half of the participants identified themselves as New Zealand European/Pakeha.

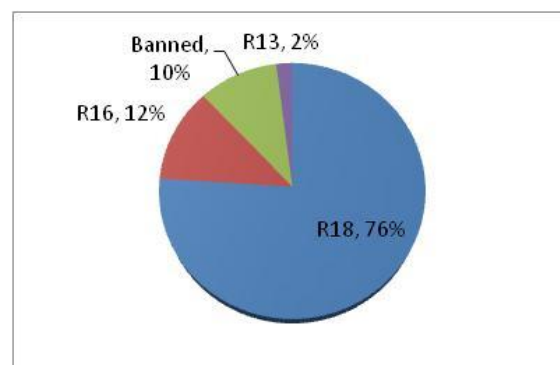


Nineteen participants had care of children aged under 18.

3 Questionnaire Responses

3.1 Classification of *The Last House on the Left*

The majority (39) recommended that the film be classified R18. Six recommended an R16 classification and one person recommended R13. Five considered that the film, in its present form, should be classified objectionable. Of those who thought the film should be banned, all suggested that, with excisions, the film could be restricted in some way.



3.1.1 Summary results of those who recommended objectionable

Three women and two men recommended the film be classified objectionable. Four were parents of children under 18. One was aged over 51, one under 30, and they were a mix of two Maori, two Pakeha, and one Pacific Islander. The scenes they would cut were:

Stabbing of Paige	4
Rape of Mari	4
Cop being strangled	1
Garbage disposal unit and microwave deaths	1

3.1.2 Summary results of those who recommended R18

Twenty-one men and 18 women recommended the film be made R18. All of those attending aged over 50, except one, made this recommendation, as did three-quarters of those in each of the other age bands.

Seven recommending R18 also wanted excisions – particularly to the depiction of the rape of Mari – six out of seven wanted that scene modified. Even with excisions, this group still recommended the film be classified R18.

3.1.3 Summary results of those who recommended R16

Three men and three women recommended the film be classified R16. Three were aged between 31 and 50, and three were between 18 and 30. Five out of six were Pakeha and two had care of children under 18. One recommended excisions to the rape scene, but would not change the classification as a result.

3.1.4 Parental comparisons

Twelve of the 39 who recommended the film be classified R18 had care of children under 18. Of the other seven parents of children under 18, four wanted the film banned, two recommended the R16 rating and one (a parent of 13-17 year olds) said it should be R13.

3.2 Reasons for recommended classification

Participants were asked what content in the film made them recommend the classification that they did.

3.2.1 Reasons given by those who recommended objectionable

All five participants recommending the film be banned were concerned about the level of violence in it. Words such as 'graphic', 'gratuitous' and 'gruesome' were used to describe it. One male participant would have classified the film R16 but for the violence of the rape scene. Another male participant felt that the stabbing of Paige was explicit sexual violence, even torture – which he felt supported graphic sexual violence. Another female participant was most disturbed by the coercion of Justin (Krug's son), but she felt that the 'promotion and support of violence and sexual activity under coercion would be difficult to edit out'.

3.2.2 Reasons given by those who recommended R18

The majority of participants, 39 out of 51, recommended the film be classified R18. They noted the following types of content as reasons:

- Sexual violence/the rape scene/stabbing scene = 34
- Violence/graphic violence/sadistic violence/gratuitous violence = 26
- Cruelty/brutality/torture = 5
- Gruesome scenes = 2
- Police killed = 2
- Crime = 2
- Offensive language = 2
- Nudity = 1

No-one noted drug use in response to this question.

Participants' comments about why they chose the R18 classification included:

The nature of the violence, in particular that meted out to the young women – it was essentially unprovoked. And the delight of the villains lent weight to the idea that this may be acceptable. (male, aged 51+, Pakeha, non-parent)

Farcical nature of the film from insinuator scene onwards pulls it up from controversy that your 'Deliverance' and 'Straw Dogs' films garner. (male, 31-50, Pakeha, non-parent)

Violence and sex scenes: they were fairly extreme, although gave a better understanding on how the parents reacted. (female, aged 31-50, Pakeha, non-parent)

Level of violence – but I don't consider it was worse than other films I've seen. In the end the good guys won! (female, 31-50, Pakeha, non-parent)

The lack of any remorse/feeling from all the perpetrators as if gratification was gained from the acts – even on the parents' part. (male, 51+, Pakeha, non-parent)

The rape scene – it was well filmed and non-explicit, but does deal with sexual exploitation of a minor. (female, 18-30, Pakeha, non-parent)

Gratuitous use of violence and sexual force that seemed to have little to do with moving the story forward or 'developing' the characters. In particular: the rape scene; hand in insinuator; and microwave closing scene. (female, 18-30, Pakeha, non-parent)

3.2.3 Reasons given by those who recommended R16 and R13

The six participants recommending a classification of R16 did so for the following reasons:

- Graphic rape
- Torture
- Graphic/high levels violence
- Depiction of sexual pleasure derived from violence and rape

Comments included:

...the general feeling that I got that violence in revenge is okay or somehow more acceptable. (male, 31-50, Pakeha, parent)

It is a fairly regular horror/thriller flick stuff. (female, 18-30, Pakeha, non-parent)

The participant recommending a classification of R13 commented:

I found some parts quite amusing. Overall, the film's storyline is predictable, but I didn't expect it to end the way it did. (female, 31-50, Maori, parent)

3.3 Likely injury caused by unrestricted access to the film

Participants were asked what injury to the public good could occur if the film was shown to people in breach of the classification they recommended.

3.3.1 Harms identified by those who recommended objectionable

Harms identified by those recommending the film be classified as objectionable were: it would disturb or terrorise younger audiences; it would glorify the power of villains; the behaviour it depicted might appear acceptable because of the realism; people might think the level of sadism by the father revenging his daughter's rape was justified.

3.3.2 Harms identified by those who recommended R18

Harms identified by those recommending the film be classified R18 included:

- it would expose [younger people] to violent and sexual ideas that could disturb them
- it encouraged the idea that premeditated violence is acceptable or can be justified when done for revenge
- it increases the potential for violence in society, and the use of drugs
- those unable to emotionally process such things as rape and violence would be exposed to them
- [younger people] may fear for their own lives
- seeing a rape scene – being influenced to think that sexual coercion is 'cool' or acceptable
- night terrors
- desensitisation to violent behaviour toward young women

3.3.3 Harms identified by those who recommended R16

- [younger people] imitating bad behaviour
- having nightmares/being scared
- learning things you shouldn't know about before 16
- desensitisation
- unnatural understanding of sex
- believing that violence and rape are acceptable behaviours

4 Notes from the Discussion

During the screening, it was clear that audience members took some pleasure in the parents' revenge, as there was laughter at moments such as when Frank's broken nose was painfully repaired by [Dr] John Collingwood, and when his arm was being pushed into the garbage disposal unit.

The following provides a flavour of the range of concerns expressed during the discussion led by the Chief Censor once participants had filled in their questionnaires.

Of immediate concern was the sexualised nature of some of the violence within the film, particularly Paige's stabbing and Mari's rape.

Asked whether they thought cuts to the rape scene might somehow [detrimentally] sanitise the effect of it, one participant felt that it would be better cut entirely – 'do they need the rape scene? Wouldn't it have been enough that the father realised that had happened?' Others felt the rape scene was necessary, in its entirety, to motivate the second half of the film – the parents' revenge. One commented that the scene should be retained because it was a powerful scene, if difficult to watch. A young man said he knew people who would probably think it was a really great film, but in his view the rape scene was too extreme for the nature of the film as a whole – which was 'so ridiculous'.

Discussing the gratuitous nature of some of the violence, one commented that the parents became as evil and sadistic as the perpetrators – and the film had no merit once that occurred. Another noted, cynically, that most of the film was no worse than you see all the time at the movies or on TV. However, many thought that blowing Krug's head off in the microwave at the end of the film was a laughable and/or dispensable scene.

Asked whether watching the film in the cinema or on DVD at home would make a difference to its classification, those responding to the question indicated that watching it at home would be worse. As one said, 'I would ban it for DVD rental and just keep it in the cinema'.

During the discussion, the role that drugs played in the storyline was raised. One man said 'if there hadn't been drugs, and they hadn't gone back to the motel...[none of it would have happened]'. Similarly, another saw the film as 'a cautionary tale leading up to the rape – the girls were silly and the rape scene justified...'

Finally, the film's use of highly offensive language was discussed briefly. Participants indicated they expected that type of language to be used within a film dealing with violent themes.

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