



CLASSIFICATION REVIEW BOARD

31 May 2002

23-33 MARY STREET SURRY HILLS, NSW

PRESENT: Ms Maureen Shelley (Convenor)
Ms Dawn Grassick
Ms Kathryn Smith

APPLICANT United International Pictures Pty

BUSINESS: To review the decision of the Classification Board to assign the classification PG under the Classification (Publications, Films and Computer Games) Act 1995 to the film *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron*, (the film) with the consumer advice "Adult themes, Low level animated violence".

DECISION AND REASONS FOR DECISION

1. Decision

The Classification Review Board decided to set aside the decision of the Classification Board to classify the film PG and to classify the film G and provide consumer advice "Some scenes may scare very young children".

2. Legislative provisions

The *Classification (Publications, Film and Computer Games) Act 1995* (the Act) governs the classification of films and the review of classification decisions. The Act provides that films be classified in accordance with the National Classification Code and the classification guidelines.

3. Procedure

Three members of the Review Board viewed the film at its meeting of 31 May 2002.

The Review Board heard oral submission from Mr Michael Selwyn representing the applicant and received additional written submission from the applicant.

4. Matters taken into account

In reaching its decision the Review Board had regard to the following:

- (a) the applicant's Application for Review
- (b) the film *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron*
- (c) the relevant provisions in the Act

- (d) the relevant provisions in the National Classification Code as amended in accordance with Section 6 of the Act.
- (e) the Guidelines for the Classification of Films and Videotapes determined under Section 12 of the Act.

5. Findings on material questions of fact

The plot

In its submission the applicant stated: “*Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron* follows the adventures of a wild and rambunctious stallion as he journeys through the untamed American frontier. Encountering man for the first time, Spirit defies being broken, even as he develops a remarkable friendship with a young Lakota brave named Little Creek. The courageous young stallion also finds love with a beautiful paint mare named Rain on his way to becoming one of the greatest unsung heroes of the Old West.”

The Board considered this was a reasonable summary of the film.

Spirit is captured by the US Cavalry and an attempt is made to break him in. He resists this attempt and with the help of Little Creek escapes, only to be recaptured, after several adventures, by the cavalry and sent to assist in the laying of the railway line. He realises the coming of the railway will threaten his family home and sabotages the project. In doing so he derails a train which crashes, turning over and over, and appears to pursue him down a hill. A broken chain around Spirit’s neck is caught and he appears trapped. Little Creek steps in just in time to save him and the two continue in their attempt at escape. A fire pursues them, again they escape. Little Creek is shot at and wounded by the US Cavalry (there is no blood and the shooting takes place in the distance). Spirit goes back and saves Little Creek and they start a wild ride with the cavalry in pursuit. There are cliff-hanging scenes but throughout Spirit is confident and Little Creek emits delighted war-whoops. The pair, after much clever and courageous effort, appear trapped on a high mesa. Spirit jumps across a seemingly impossible divide and gets them both to safety. Little Creek after saying “Oh no” emits cries of delight and executes a sitting dance in appreciation of the feat. A soldier raises his rifle to shoot but the Colonel restrains him - the pair have earned their freedom.

6. Reasons for the Decision

The film is an animated feature aimed at a family audience. It features many pretty scenes - particularly of Arizona’s painted desert - uplifting music and a traditionally-told tale with a hero facing adversity which he overcomes through cleverness and bravery. When he is unable to overcome the many obstacles in his path to freedom, his friends are there to help. He and his friends face their adventures, generally, with good humour and a belief in themselves. At one point Spirit feels sad and depressed in captivity but thinks of his family and he is uplifted.

It is a simple story, well told and would be appealing to many children and adults. The tone of the film is light and entertaining.

There is a birth scene at the beginning of the film but it is short, with little detail (Spirit’s mother grunts and pushes a few times and is encouraged by the whinnies of

the herd) and no fluid of any kind is shown. The scene ends with Spirit's birth and is accompanied by up-beat music and humorous moments when Spirit recognises his mother and latches on to suckle.

The film demonstrates sensitivity to the issue of the settlement of America by Europeans and the conflict with the native American peoples. The minimal dialogue in the film uses the word "hostiles" for the First Nation people. The native Americans are shown as having loving families, strong friendships and a supportive culture.

Spirit as a leader of his group is sensitive and responsible. He demonstrates that he is kind and considerate, caring for his mother, mindful of the needs of the colts and fillies, a strong protector and, while glorying in his strength and leading role, cares about his family, the land and the future. He is shown as a strong, capable, resourceful character. Even in capture he protects and leads other horses and thinks his way through his difficulties. In one scene Spirit protects some foals from a mountain lion, he chases the mountain lion off. The mountain lion appears unhurt.

The cavalry are the adversaries in the film but they are not shown as cruel or overzealous. They are depicted going about their business with professionalism and even the "bad guy", the farrier/blacksmith Murphy, is shown as a somewhat comical character rather than as an evil person. The men who put Spirit onto the train, showing the most sombre scenes of the film, tell him he will be all right and are caring.

The role of females in the film is minimal and they are shown in traditional roles - caring mother (horse), loving friend (horse), caring mother (native American mother). At one point Spirit snorts "Mares" in a somewhat frustrated tone, but otherwise females, either animal or human, play very little part in the film. Rain, who comes to love Spirit, is shown as pretty, loving and loyal. She is shown as being in need of Spirit's support and assistance and, when he is captured, Little Creek steps in to save her.

There is some shooting and use of knives in the film but their use is not detailed, scenes are shot at a distance, there is no blood (even when Little Creek gets a wound in the leg) and the scenes are short.

There is no coarse language in the film. In an early scene a soldier says: "Son of a" and is hushed by a second soldier. There is no other suggestion of coarse language.

In his submission Mr Selwyn for the applicant said that the adult themes, of separation and possible harm, to which the Classification Board referred were common themes in children's stories. He stated: "One of the strongest themes running through the film is that of Spirit and his friend's ability to overcome the problems that they encounter and this both an immensely positive message and one that is easily understood by even young children".

Whilst the film contains violence it is very discreetly implied with little or no detail. The violence is infrequent and is in context in the film, which is an animated feature. There is no sense of menace with the shooting taking place from far off.

Spirit is depicted as a powerful figure as a protector and is shown as resourceful in the face of adversity.

The Board concurred with the applicant that separation themes were familiar to children and were positively dealt with in the context of the storyline.

The Board noted that the film's climax beginning (at 1.01) when Spirit escapes from the chain gain and culminating in the Colonel restraining a soldier from shooting the pair (at 1.10) is relatively brief, contains several minutes of light relief and ends positively. However, there are moments when the action is quite intense (the fire racing down the hill, the crashing train is coming toward Spirit and his chain is caught, when the pair round the cliff and nearly fall, when Spirit leaps the mighty divide).

Mindful that the G classification is one where "parents should feel confident that children can watch material in this classification without supervision" as stated in the Guidelines, the Board felt consumer advice should be given. Whilst the Board felt the film would not be harmful or disturbing, it believed that these scenes may scare very young children. Generally, consumer advice is not provided for material classified G. The Board believed the film would be suitable for all ages but parents of very young children would benefit from the advice as stated.

7. Summary

7.1 The Review Board's decision is to set aside the decision of the Classification Board to classify the film *Spirit: Stallion of the Cimarron* PG and to apply the classification G with the consumer advice "some scenes may scare very young children".

This decision is taken after full consideration of the applicant's submission, and after assessing the film as a whole against the relevant legislative criteria, including those contained in the Code and the Guidelines.



Maureen Shelley
Convenor

17 June 2002