

Swedish cinemas introduce 'feminism rating' for films

Cinemas in Sweden have begun to issue ratings for films depending on how they portray women: whether there are named female characters, who speak together, and whether they discuss something other than a man



Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows: Part 1 Photo: Courtesy of Warner Bros Pictures



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By Harriet Alexander

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What do the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, *Pulp Fiction*, *Star Wars* and most of the *Harry Potter* films have in common?

They all fail the Bechdel Test – a means of assessing whether films portray men and women equally. And as a result, a group of cinemas in Sweden have decided to publicise their "rating" alongside traditional age-suitability classifications of films, sparking a national debate about how women are portrayed on screen.

"The goal is to see more female stories and perspectives on cinema screens," said Ellen Tejle, the director of Bio Rio – one of the four cinemas to adopt the ratings system.

To receive an "A" rating, the film must have at least two named female characters who talk to each other about something other than a man.

"For some people it has been an eye-opener," she said, adding that film watchers rarely see "a female superhero or a female professor or person who makes it through exciting challenges and masters them."

Inside the art house cinema's wood-panelled lobby, in the fashionable Sodermalm district of Stockholm, students Nikolaj Gula and Vincent Fremont acknowledged that most of their favourite films probably would not get an "A" rating.

"I guess it does make sense, but to me it would not influence the way I watch films because I'm not so aware about these questions," said Mr Fremont, 29.

Of the top 100 American-made films released in 2011, women accounted for one third of all characters but only 11 per cent of the protagonists, according to a study by the Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film.

At least one Hollywood star sounded excited by the idea when asked about the rating.

"A feminist ratings system? That's so interesting!" said Jada Pinkett Smith, actress and producer, and wife of Will Smith. Speaking in

Beverly Hills, California, where she was attending a benefit dinner for gender equality, she added: "I say, hey, let's see if it works."

Not everyone in Sweden approves of the measure.

"If they want different kind of movies they should produce some themselves and not just point fingers at other people," said Tanja Bergkvist, a physicist who writes a blog about Sweden's "gender madness."

Hynek Pallas, a Swedish film critic, also criticised the state-funded Swedish Film Institute – the biggest financier of Swedish film – for vocally supporting the project, saying a state institution should not "send out signals about what one should or shouldn't include in a movie."

"There are far too many films that pass the Bechdel test that don't help at all in making society more equal or better, and there are lots of films that don't pass the test – but are fantastic at those things," he said.

"I don't think it's at all surprising that Sweden is the first country to do this," said Anna Read, founder of the London Feminist Film Festival. "And it's something that I'd like to see introduced here in the UK."

"How women are portrayed in films affects how they are perceived in real life, and all too often there is a narrow representation of women as just a sidekick to a man.

"It's not a perfect appraisal, and doesn't reflect a film's quality. But at least it gets people talking."

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