

X

X (RATED)

In contemporary articulations of gender and sexuality, the letter *X* carries semiotic currency as a symbol of diverse yet interrelated phenomena, among them indeterminacy, anonymity, censorship, and pornography. Although the letter has been long associated with various sorts of graphic iconicity (for example, the *X* of the term *X-chair*, used for a chair with an underframe that resembles the shape of the letter *X*), the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) credits René Descartes (1596–1650) with first using the letter as a symbol for an unknown or variable quantity. Descartes's algebraic *X*, initially proposed in his *La Géométrie* (1637), appears to be the historical predecessor of more contemporary developments. By the late 1700s the symbol *X* had traveled far outside its mathematical womb, surfacing in diverse legal and literary texts as a replacement for a person's name when unknown or undetermined, such as in novelist William Makepeace Thackeray's (1811–1863) *Ballads of Policeman X* (1848) or in astronomer Percival Lowell's (1855–1916) naming of the hypothetical post-Pluto Planet *X* in the early 1900s. The use of *X* as a marker of anonymity reached a new level of semiotic appeal at the turn of the twentieth century, however, when the American artist John Singer Sargent (1856–1925) and the French playwright Alexandre Bisson (1848–1912) independently created portraits of a mysterious and sensual Madame *X*. Whereas Sargent's sexually suggestive painting *Madame X* scandalized the Parisian art world when first unveiled at the Salon of 1884, the fallen and ultimately murderous mother of Bisson's play *La Femme X* captured the attention of viewers for decades to come. Performed both in Paris and on Broadway in 1910, the

play was subsequently reworked into no less than eight films carrying the title *Madame X*—among them movie director Sam Wood's (1883–1949) 1937 version starring Gladys George (1904–1954), and David Lowell Rich's (b. 1920) 1966 version starring Lana Turner (1920–1995).

The letter *X* has surfaced as a marker of anonymity in a variety of nonartistic domains as well, not the least of which is its appearance in the controversial *Accouchement Sous X* (Born under the *X*), a French law dating from 1941 that guarantees women the right to enter hospitals and give birth anonymously. Yet the turn-of-the-century contributions of artists such as Sargent and Bisson worked to foster the idea that anonymity is sexy. This conflation no doubt precipitated the letter *X*'s semantic shift in the second half of the twentieth century to a symbol of both censorship and pornography. In 1951 the British Board of Film Censors introduced the *X* Certificate, a cinematic rating for films with adult-oriented themes perceived as inappropriate for viewers under the age of sixteen. Because it replaced the previous *H* Certificate, which was used primarily for violent horror films, the *X* Certificate quickly became associated with the stuff of sex instead of violence, a narrowing in sync with *X*'s parallel reputation as a cinematically sensual letter. The Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA), under the direction of President Jack Valenti (b. 1921), introduced its own *X*-rating in 1968 when it developed a new ratings system in an effort to stave off federal censorship. One year later, director John Schlesinger's (1926–2003) *Midnight Cowboy* became the first *X*-rated film to win an Academy Award for best picture, in line with the

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film industry's desire to support the development of adult themes with controversial artistic or sociopolitical merit.

But even though the MPAA trademarked its other three ratings—*G* (general audiences), *M* (mature audiences [later changed to PG, for parental guidance]), and *R* (restricted audiences)—it failed to trademark the *X* rating. When the pornography industry co-opted the rating for its own commercial purposes, the letter *X* began to lose all trace of cinematic prestige as it became increasingly associated with low-budget porn. Although the MPAA, as with the British Board of Film Censors, had originally intended the rating to denote extreme representations of violence as well as sex, the letter *X* ultimately came to symbolize only the latter. It was not long before the reduplicative forms *XX* and *XXX* came to signify extra-hardcore pornographic content, reminiscent of the liquor industry's use of double and triple *X* to designate the relational values of medium and strong quality, a practice recorded by the OED as occurring in 1827. By the late 1980s, the letter *X* could no longer be rescued from its outlaw status as a signifier of purportedly immoral behavior. The letter's phonetic similarity to the English word *sex* also played into this development, with the European- and North American-originating pornography industry capitalizing on the rhyme in a global marketplace of (SE)*X*-rated paraphernalia. With newspapers refusing to advertise *X*-rated films and theaters refusing to show them, the Motion Picture Association finally abolished the *X* rating in 1990 and replaced it with *NC-17* (no one 17 and under admitted).

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the letter *X* came to be seen as indexical of censorship more generally, with Internet-revitalized youth subcultures such as

straight edge (abbreviated as *sXe*) adopting the symbol to index a lifestyle free of tobacco, alcohol, and recreational drugs. Indeed, some Christian groups in the United States have pointed to the spelling of *Christmas* as *Xmas* as exemplary of a leftwing conspiracy to censor *Christ* from *Christmas*. It is largely irrelevant that this abbreviation is derived from the earlier Greek abbreviation of *Χριστός* (*Christós*) by its initial letter (a usage documented as early as 1485), for the letter *X* has taken on new life in the twenty-first century as a provocative, if not threatening, symbol of things requiring surveillance.

SEE ALSO *Censorship; Erotic Art; Film, Gender and Eroticism: I. History of; Obscene; Pornography; Sexual Subcultures.*

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