



MARKING INDECENCY

A look at the sultry history of the XXX sign and the ubiquitous use of the letter "X."

by Steven Heller

"X" is the sexiest letter in the alphabet—think of two people and four legs intertwined—and certainly one of the most symbolically diverse. "X" is the sign of the kiss in xoxo (kisses and hugs). It's Roman numeral 10. It substitutes for a signature, as in "make your X." It locates treasure on a map: "X" marks the spot. It factors into mathematical equations ($a + b = x$). It's a signifier for extra strength. It substitutes for Christmas (Xmas). A former partner is an "ex." A long time ago, when they were scrawled on beer kegs, "X"s indicated the amount of tax paid by tavern owners—and speaking of beer, Dos Equis comes to mind. Let's not forget Malcolm X—the "X" repudiated and excised the last name of the white slave-masters who brutalized his ancestors. Whatever its meaning or significance, people understand "X" has import, and, given the context, they seem to know what each "X" means.

The most recognized "X" is the one used by the Motion Picture Associate of America film rating system. This letter sign, which prohibits "persons under 18" from admittance to any film featuring graphic sexual or violent content, began in the U.S. in 1968, replacing the censorious Hays Code. However, "X" was part of the British Board of Film Classification, starting in 1951 (replacing an H for Horror). This X rating stopped persons younger than 16 years old from being admitted into dicey films; it was later

replaced by R18 (Restricted 18), which exed out the "X" altogether. "X" is a stop sign that beckons. "X" is the promise of danger, rebellion, even subversion. Add two more "X"s and the symbolic and cognitive stakes are exponentially raised. XXX is taboo, out of the norm, extremely potent—it's raw sex. A storefront with the triple "X" brand is less than wholesome. XXX is the quintessence of seedy.

Like most things vernacular, it evolved gradually and circuitously. "X" became sexualized in the 1960s when the film industry realized that an X rating both limited the range of distribution and extended the opportunities to sell through alternative outlets. "X" means bad, which makes it good in certain quarters. In the late 1960s, pornography was becoming tolerated, and as a result, it became more chic. X-rated films were in great demand, and the unholy "X" (whether bestowed by the MPAA or not) was a sales aid—signalling that graphic sex was in generous supply (today's HBO series would have gotten X or, later, NC17 ratings). Eventually, film distributors needed radical distinctions between the tame "X," which involved full-frontal nudity, XX, which suggested simulation of the sex act, and XXX, which flaunted hard-core sex. The "X" was never officially codified by a governing body, but the definition of XXX is universally acknowledged as breaking the ceiling of bad. ■