

# Movies

## Media Quote of the Week

9-2-05

"Hollywood keeps making movies that are offensive to the heartland, and they keep losing money." Actor and former U.S. Congressman Ben Jones (Cooter in the original Dukes of Hazzard) talking about the raunchy Dukes remake [The Washington Times, August 4, 2005]

## How it all Began

By Jack Valenti

When I became president of the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) in May 1966, the slippage of Hollywood studio authority over the content of films collided with an avalanching revision of American mores and customs.

By summer of 1966, the national scene was marked by insurrection on the campus, riots in the streets, rise in women's liberation, protest of the young, doubts about the institution of marriage, abandonment of old guiding slogans, and the crumbling of social traditions. It would have been foolish to believe that movies, that most creative of art forms, could have remained unaffected by the change and torment in our society.

## A New Kind of American Movie

The result of all this was the emergence of a "new kind" of American movie - frank and open, and made by filmmakers subject to very few self-imposed restraints.

Almost within weeks in my new duties, I was confronted with controversy, neither amiable nor fixable. The first issue was the film "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf," in which, for the first time on the screen, the word "screw" and the phrase "hump the hostess" were heard. In company with the MPAA's general counsel, Louis Nizer, I met with Jack Warner, the legendary chieftain of Warner Bros., and his top aide, Ben Kalmenson. We talked for three hours, and the result was deletion of "screw" and retention of "hump the hostess," but I was uneasy over the meeting.

It seemed wrong that grown men should be sitting around discussing such matters. Moreover, I was uncomfortable with the thought that this was just the beginning of an unsettling new era in film, in which we would lurch from crisis to crisis, without any suitable solution in sight.

The second issue surfaced only a few months later.

This time it was Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, and the Michelangelo Antonioni film "Blow-Up."

I met with MGM's chief executive officer because this movie also represented a first - the first time a major distributor was marketing a film with nudity in it. The Production Code Administration in California had denied the seal of approval.

I backed the decision, whereupon MGM distributed the film through a subsidiary company, thereby flouting the voluntary agreement of MPAA member companies that none would distribute a film without a Code seal.

Finally, in April 1968, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld the constitutional power of states and cities to prevent the exposure of children to books and films that could not be denied to adults.

It was plain that the old system of self-regulation, begun with the formation of the MPAA in 1922, had broken down. What few threads there were holding together the structure created by Will Hays, one of my two predecessors, had now snapped. From the very first day of my own succession to the MPAA President's office, I had sniffed the Production Code constructed by the Hays Office. There was about this stern, forbidding catalogue of "Dos and Don'ts" the odious smell of censorship. I determined to junk it at the first opportune moment.

I knew that the mix of new social currents, the irresistible force of creators determined to make "their" films and the possible intrusion of government into the movie arena demanded my immediate action.

Within weeks, discussions of my plan for a movie rating system began with the president of the National Association of Theatre Owners (NATO) and with the governing committee of the International Film Importers & Distributors of America (IFIDA), an assembly of independent producers and distributors.

Over the next five months, I held more than 100 hours of meetings with these two organizations, as well as with guilds of actors, writers, directors and producers, with craft unions, with critics, with religious organizations, and with the heads of MPAA member companies.

## **The Birth of the Ratings**

By early fall, I was ready. My colleagues in the National Association of Theatre Owners joined with me in affirming our objective of creating a new and, at the time, revolutionary approach to how we would fulfill our obligation to the parents of America.

My first move was to abolish the old and decaying Hays Production Code. I did that immediately. Then on November 1, 1968, we announced the birth of the new voluntary film rating system of the motion picture industry, with three organizations, NATO, MPAA, and IFIDA, as its monitoring and guiding groups.

The initial design called for four rating categories:

G for General Audiences, all ages admitted;

M for mature audiences - parental guidance suggested, but all ages admitted;

R for Restricted, children under 16 would not be admitted without an accompanying parent or adult guardian; (later raised to under 17 years of age, (and varies in some jurisdictions));

X for no one under 17 admitted.

The rating system trademarked all the category symbols, except the X. Under the plan, anyone not submitting his or her film for rating could self apply the X or any other symbol or description, except those trademarked by the rating program.

Our original plan had been to use only three rating categories, ending with R. It was my view that parents ought to be able to accompany their children to any movie the parents choose, without the movie industry or the government or self-appointed groups interfering with their rights. But NATO urged the creation of an adults only category, fearful of possible legal redress under state or local law. I acquiesced in NATO's reasoning and the four category system, including the X rating, was installed.

So, the emergence of the voluntary rating system filled the vacuum provided by my dismantling of the Hays Production Code. The movie industry would no longer "approve or disapprove" the content of a film, but we would now see our primary task as giving advance cautionary warnings to parents so that parents could make the decision about the moviegoing of their young children.

## **Changes in the Rating System**

We found early on that the M category (M meaning "Mature") was regarded by most parents as a sterner rating than the R category. To remedy this misconception, we changed the name from M to GP (meaning General audiences, Parental guidance suggested). A year later we revised the name to its current label, "PG: Parental Guidance Suggested."

On July 1, 1984, we made another adjustment. We split the PG category into two groupings, PG and PG-13. PG-13 meant a higher level of intensity than was to be found in a film rated PG. Over the past years, parents have approved of this amplifying revision in the rating system.

On September 27, 1990, we announced two more revisions. First, we introduced brief explanations of why a particular film received its R rating. Since, in the opinion of the Ratings Board, R rated films contain adult material, we believed it would be useful to parents to know a little more about that film's content before they allowed their children to accompany them. Sometime later we began applying the explanations in the PG, PG-13 and NC-17 categories as well. These explanations are available to parents at the theater (by telephone or at the box office), in certain media reviews and listings, and also made available on the MPAA's World Wide Web Home Page on the Internet. This internet address is <http://www.mpa.org>.

Second, we changed the name of the X category to NC-17:NO ONE 17 AND UNDER

ADMITTED. The X rating over the years appeared to have taken on a surly meaning in the minds of many people, a meaning that was never intended when we created the system. Therefore, we chose to reaffirm the original intent of the design we installed on November 1, 1968, in which this "adults only" category explicitly describes a movie that most parents would want to have barred to viewing by their children. That was and is our goal, nothing more, nothing less.

We have now trademarked "NC-17:NO ONE 17 AND UNDER ADMITTED" so that this rating symbol and the legend can be used only by those who submit their films for rating.

## **The Purpose of the Rating System**

The basic mission of the rating system is a simple one: to offer to parents some advance information about movies so that parents can decide what movies they want their children to see or not to see. The entire rostrum of the rating program rests on the assumption of responsibility by parents. If parents don't care, or if they are languid in guiding their children's movie going, the rating system becomes useless. Indeed, if you are 18 or over, or if you have no children, the rating system has no meaning for you. Ratings are meant for parents, no one else.

The Rating Board does not rate movies on their quality or lack of quality. That is a role left to film critics and audiences. Had we attempted to insert ourselves into judging whether a film is "good" or "bad" or "indifferent" we would have collapsed the system before it began.

The criteria that go into the mix which becomes a Rating Board judgment are theme, violence, language, nudity, sensuality, drug abuse, and other elements. Part of the rating flows from how each of these elements is treated on-screen by the filmmaker. In making their evaluation, the members of the Ratings Board do not look at snippets of film in isolation but consider the film in its entirety. The Rating Board can make its decisions only by what is seen on the screen, not by what is imagined or thought.

There is no special emphasis on any one of these elements. All are considered. All are examined before a rating is applied. Contrary to popular notion, violence is not treated more leniently than any of the other material. Indeed many films rated X in the past and NC-17 now, have at least tentatively been given the "adults only" rating because of depictions of violence. However, most of the directors/producers/distributors involved have chosen, by their decision, to edit intense violent scenes in order to receive an R rating.

## **How The Ratings Are Decided**

The ratings are decided by a full-time Rating Board located in Los Angeles. There are 8-13 members of the Board who serve for periods of varying length. They work for the Classification and Rating Administration, which is funded by fees charged to producers/distributors for the rating of their films. The MPAA President chooses the Chairman of the Rating Board, thereby insulating the Board from industry or other group pressure. No one in the movie industry has the authority or the power to push the Board in any direction or otherwise influence it. One of the highest accolades to be conferred on the rating system is that from its birth in 1968 to this hour, there has never been even the slightest jot of evidence that the rating system has ever deliberately

fudged a decision or bowed to pressure. The Rating Board has always conducted itself at the highest level of integrity. That is a large, honorable, and valuable asset.

There are no special qualifications for Board membership, except the members must have a shared parenthood experience, must be possessed of an intelligent maturity, and most of all, have the capacity to put themselves in the role of most American parents so they can view a film and apply a rating that most parents would find suitable and helpful in aiding their decisions about their children's movie going.

As the MPAA President, I take no part in rating decisions, and do not overrule or dissuade the Board from any decisions it makes.

No one is forced to submit a film to the Board for rating, but the vast majority of producers/distributors do in fact submit their films for ratings. Any producer/distributor who wants no part of any rating system is free to go to the market without any rating at all or with any description or symbol they choose as long as it is not confusingly similar to the G, PG, PG-13, R, and, NC-17. The rating symbols are federally-registered certification marks of the MPAA and may not be self-applied.

## **The Board Votes on Ratings**

The Board views each film. Each member present estimates what most parents would consider to be that film's appropriate rating. After group discussion, the Board votes on the rating. Each member completes a rating form spelling out his or her reason for the rating.

Each rating is decided by majority vote.

The producer/distributor of a film has the right under the rules to inquire as to the "why" of the rating applied. The producer/distributor also has the right, based on the reasons for the rating, to edit the film - if that is the choice of the producer/distributor - and come back to the Board to try for a less severe rating. The reedited film is brought back to the Board and the process goes forward again.

## **Appeal of Ratings**

A producer/distributor who for any reason is displeased with a rating can appeal the decision to the Rating Appeals Board, which sits as the final arbiter of ratings.

The Appeals Board comprises 14 to 18 members who serve terms of varying length. They are men and women from the industry organizations that govern the rating system.

They gather to view the film and hear the appeal. After the screening, the producer/distributor whose film is being appealed explains why he or she believes the rating was wrongly decided. The chairman of the Rating Board states the reason for the film's rating. The producer/distributor has an opportunity for rebuttal.

After Appeals Board members question the two opposing representatives, they are excused from the room. The Board discusses the appeal and then takes a secret ballot. It requires a two-thirds vote of those present to overturn a Rating Board decision.

By this method of appeal, decisions of the Rating Board can be examined and any rating deemed a mistake set right.

The decision of the Appeals Board is final and cannot be appealed.

## **What the ratings mean**

G:"General Audiences-All Ages Admitted."

This is a film which contains nothing in theme, language, nudity and sex, violence, etc. which would, in the view of the Rating Board, be offensive to parents whose younger children view the film. The G rating is not a "certificate of approval," nor does it signify a children's film.

Some snippets of language may go beyond polite conversation but they are common everyday expressions. No stronger words are present in G-rated films. The violence is at a minimum. Nudity and sex scenes are not present; nor is there any drug use content.

PG:"Parental Guidance Suggested. Some Material May Not Be Suitable For Children."

This is a film which clearly needs to be examined or inquired into by parents before they let their children attend. The label PG plainly states that parents may consider some material unsuitable for their children, but the parent must make the decision.

Parents are warned against sending their children, unseen and without inquiry, to PG-rated movies.

The theme of a PG-rated film may itself call for parental guidance. There may be some profanity in these films. There may be some violence or brief nudity. But these elements are not deemed so intense as to require that parents be strongly cautioned beyond the suggestion of parental guidance. There is no drug use content in a PG-rated film.

The PG rating, suggesting parental guidance, is thus an alert for examination of a film by parents before deciding on its viewing by their children.

Obviously such a line is difficult to draw. In our pluralistic society it is not easy to make judgments without incurring some disagreement. So long as parents know they must exercise parental responsibility, the rating serves as a meaningful guide and as a warning.

PG-13:"Parents Strongly Cautioned. Some Material May Be Inappropriate For Children Under 13."

PG-13 is thus a sterner warning to parents to determine for themselves the attendance in

particular of their younger children as they might consider some material not suited for them. Parents, by the rating, are alerted to be very careful about the attendance of their under-teenage children.

A PG-13 film is one which, in the view of the Rating Board, leaps beyond the boundaries of the PG rating in theme, violence, nudity, sensuality, language, or other contents, but does not quite fit within the restricted R category. Any drug use content will initially require at least a PG-13 rating. In effect, the PG-13 cautions parents with more stringency than usual to give special attention to this film before they allow their 12-year olds and younger to attend.

If nudity is sexually oriented, the film will generally not be found in the PG-13 category. If violence is too rough or persistent, the film goes into the R (restricted) rating. A film's single use of one of the harsher sexually-derived words, though only as an expletive, shall initially require the Rating Board to issue that film at least a PG-13 rating. More than one such expletive must lead the Rating Board to issue a film an R rating, as must even one of these words used in a sexual context. These films can be rated less severely, however, if by a special vote, the Rating Board feels that a lesser rating would more responsibly reflect the opinion of American parents.

PG-13 places larger responsibilities on parents for their children's moviegoing. The voluntary rating system is not a surrogate parent, nor should it be. It cannot, and should not, insert itself in family decisions that only parents can, and should, make. Its purpose is to give prescreening advance informational warnings, so that parents can form their own judgments. PG-13 is designed to make these parental decisions easier for films between PG and R.

R:"Restricted, Under 17 Requires Accompanying Parent Or Adult Guardian." In the opinion of the Rating Board, this film definitely contains some adult material. Parents are strongly urged to find out more about this film before they allow their children to accompany them.

An R-rated film may include hard language, or tough violence, or nudity within sensual scenes, or drug abuse or other elements, or a combination of some of the above, so that parents are counseled, in advance, to take this advisory rating very seriously. Parents must find out more about an R-rated movie before they allow their teenagers to view it.

NC-17:"No One 17 And Under Admitted."

This rating declares that the Rating Board believes that this is a film that most parents will consider patently too adult for their youngsters under 17. No children will be admitted. NC-17 does not necessarily mean "obscene or pornographic" in the oft-accepted or legal meaning of those words. The Board does not and cannot mark films with those words. These are legal terms and for courts to decide. The reasons for the application of an NC-17 rating can be violence or sex or aberrational behavior or drug abuse or any other elements which, when present, most parents would consider too strong and therefore off-limits for viewing by their children.

## **Appraisal**

In any appraisal, what is "too much?" becomes very controversial. How much is "too much" violence? Are classic war films too violent with scenes of marines storming a beach and slaying hundreds, wounding thousands? Is it the graphic cop killing, the gangster shoot-out, or the slap across the face of a woman that determines "too much"? How much is "blood spilled" to be given emphasis? Where is the line to be drawn between "this is alright" and "this is not alright"?

The same vexing doubts occur in sex scenes or those where language rises on the Richter scale, or where behavior not considered "normal" is revealed on the screen. What follows is disagreement, inevitable, inexorable, and oftentimes strident. That is what the rating system has to endure and confront. We understand that. We try to do our level best so that most parents would find our ratings mostly accurate and mostly useful.

But, importantly, we urge and implore parents to care about what their children see and watch, to focus their attention on movies so they can know more about a film before they consent to their children watching it.

To oversee the Rating Board, the film industry has set up a Policy Review Committee consisting of officials of MPAA and NATO. These men and women set guidelines for the Rating Board to follow, and make certain that the Board carries them out reasonably and appropriately.

Because the rating program is a self-regulatory apparatus of the film industry, it is important that no single element of the industry take on the authority of a "czar" beyond any discipline or self-restraint.

## **Advertising and Trailer Policy**

Film advertising is part of the film industry's self-regulatory mechanism. All advertising for rated motion pictures must be submitted to the Advertising Administration for approval prior to its release to the public. This includes, but is not limited to, print ads, radio and TV spots, pressbooks, videocassette packaging and theatrical and home video trailers.

Trailers are an important aspect of the program. They are approved for "all audiences," which means they may be shown with all feature films, or "restricted audiences", which limits their use to feature films rated R or NC-17. There will be, in "all audience" trailers, no scenes that caused the feature to be rated PG, PG-13, R or NC-17.

Each trailer carries at the front a tag which tells two things: (1) the audience for which the trailer has been approved, and (2) the rating of the picture being advertised. The tag for "all audience" trailers will have a green background; the tag for "restricted" trailers will have a red background. The color is to alert the projectionist against mismatching trailers with the film being shown on the theater screen.

## **How the Rating System is Used by Theater Owners and Video Retailers**

Motion picture theater owners, who co-founded the rating system in 1968, were the first group in the entertainment industry to voluntarily enforce its guidelines. NATO estimates that the majority of the theater owners in the nation observe the rating system.

In the mid 1980's, as watching movies on videocassettes at home soared in popularity, video retailers joined theater owners in embracing the voluntary guidelines of the rating system. Parents who relied on the rating system to determine which films their children viewed in theaters found the information provided by the rating classifications equally helpful in home video. To facilitate its use, ratings are displayed on both the videocassette package and the cassette itself.

The Video Software Dealers Association (VSDA), which is the major trade association for video retailers in the United States, has adopted a "Pledge to Parents" which strongly endorses the observance of the voluntary movie rating system by video retailers.

## **THE PUBLIC REACTION**

We count it crucial to make regular soundings to find out how the public perceives the rating program, and to measure the approval and disapproval of what we are doing.

Nationwide scientific polls, conducted each year by the Opinion Research Corporation of Princeton, New Jersey, have consistently given the rating program high marks by parents throughout the land. The latest poll results show that 76% of parents with children under 13 found the ratings to be "very useful" to "fairly useful" in helping them make decisions for the moviegoing of their children.

On the evidence of the polls, the rating system would not have survived if it were not providing a useful service to parents.

The rating system isn't perfect but, in an imperfect world, it seems each year to match the expectations of those whom it is designed to serve - parents of America.

Last Revised: December, 2000

## **What do the ratings symbols mean?**

**General Audience.** All ages admitted. This signifies that the film rated contains nothing most parents will consider offensive for even their youngest children to see or hear. Nudity, sex scenes, and scenes of drug use are absent; violence is minimal; snippets of dialogue may go beyond polite conversation but do not go beyond common everyday expressions.

**Parental Guidance Suggested.** Some material may not be suitable for children. This signifies that the film rated may contain some material parents might not like to expose to their young children - material that will clearly need to be examined or inquired about before children are allowed to attend the film. Explicit sex scenes and scenes of drug use are absent; nudity, if present, is seen only briefly, horror and violence do not exceed moderate levels.

Parents Strongly Cautioned. Some material may be inappropriate for children under 13. This signifies that the film rated may be inappropriate for pre-teens. Parents should be especially careful about letting their younger children attend. Rough or persistent violence is absent; sexually-oriented nudity is generally absent; some scenes of drug use may be seen; one use of the harsher sexually derived words may be heard.

Restricted-Under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian (age varies in some locations). This signifies that the rating board has concluded that the film rated contains some adult material. Parents are urged to learn more about the film before taking their children to see it. An R may be assigned due to, among other things, a film's use of language, theme, violence, sex or its portrayal of drug use.

No One 17 and Under Admitted. This signifies that the rating board believes that most American parents would feel that the film is patently adult and that children age 17 and under should not be admitted to it. The film may contain explicit sex scenes, an accumulation of sexually-oriented language, or scenes of excessive violence. The NC-17 designation does not, however, signify that the rated film is obscene or pornographic.

## **Is the rating system a law?**

No, the rating system is strictly voluntary and carries no force of law.

## **Can a rating be changed?**

Yes, the rules permit movie producers to re-edit their films and re-submit them in hopes of receiving another rating. Producers may also appeal a rating decision to the Rating Appeals Board, which is composed of men and women from the industry organizations that sponsor the rating system. A two-thirds secret ballot vote of those present on the Appeals Board may overturn a rating board decision.

## **Do all movies have to be rated?**

No. Submitting a film is purely a voluntary decision made by the film makers. However, the overwhelming majority of the producers creating entertaining, responsible films do in fact submit their films for ratings. All five Classification and Rating Administration rating symbols have been trademarked and may not be self-applied.

## **Who enforces the ratings?**

While the decision to enforce the rating system is purely voluntary, the National Association of Theatre Owners estimate that the majority of theaters observe the Classification and Rating Administration's guidelines. Greater Detail

## What else can parents do?

Parents are urged to learn as much about a film as possible before they permit their children to attend. Reading reviews and feature articles or speaking with your theater manager and friends are good ways to gather information in addition to the ratings. You can search this Web site for movie ratings and their reasons by clicking on the "Movie Search" button above.

## New Study Finds Movies Contain More Violence, Sex, and Profanity

While 2004 marks the 20th Anniversary of the PG-13 movie rating, a recent study from the Kid Risk Project at the Harvard School of Public Health finds these films, over the past ten years, have become more violent, more sexual, and more profane. The study shows increases in violence in movies rated PG and PG-13; increases in sexual content in movies rated PG, PG-13, and R; and increases in profanity in films rated PG-13 and R. The research suggests the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) has become "increasingly more lenient in assigning its age-based movie ratings."

According to Exhibitor Relations Co., Inc., a California-based firm that tracks film statistics, of those movies released between January 2000 and August 21, 2004, 108 made more than \$100 million, and, of those, 62 were rated PG-13 and 20 were rated R. Between 1990 and 1999, 128 movies earned more than \$100 million and 46 were rated PG-13 and 45 were rated R.

The MPAA uses a voluntary movie rating system, but some parents and other child advocates are calling for a universal rating system that would be applied to all popular media: movies, television, and video games. Others are seeking changes to the MPAA ratings system that would more accurately reflect a movie's content.

Using the popular KidScore Ratings, the National Institute on Media and the Family provides reviews for both video games and movies. You can access these reviews by visiting <http://www.mediafamily.org/kidscore/index.shtml>.

To learn more about the Harvard study, please go to <http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/press/releases/press07132004.html>.

## Study Finds "Ratings Creep"

Movie Ratings Categories Contain More Violence, Sex, Profanity than Decade Ago

*Today's PG13 approaches 1992's R; development of standardized, universal rating system urged*

**For immediate release: Tuesday, July 13, 2004**

Boston, MA— Violence, sex, and profanity increased significantly in movies between 1992 and

2003 according to a study by researchers from the Kids Risk Project at the Harvard School of Public Health (HSPH). The study appears July 13 in *Medscape General Medicine*, a peer-reviewed medical journal (available free at [www.medscape.com/viewarticle/480900](http://www.medscape.com/viewarticle/480900)).

Kimberly Thompson, Associate Professor in the Department of Health Policy and Management at HSPH and Director of the Kids Risk Project said, “The findings demonstrate that ratings creep has occurred over the last decade and that today’s movies contain significantly more violence, sex, and profanity on average than movies of the same rating a decade ago.”

The researchers developed a database that included movie ratings and rating reasons obtained from the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) ([www.MPAA.org](http://www.MPAA.org)) and information about movie content from two independent resources, Kids-in-Mind ([www.kids-in-mind.com](http://www.kids-in-mind.com)) and Screen It! ([www.screenit.com](http://www.screenit.com)). They then assessed the relationship between movie ratings and content and trends for films released between January 1, 1992 and December 31, 2003.

Thompson and co-author Fumie Yokota, formerly a researcher at HSPH, found a significant increase of violence, sex and profanity in films over the 11-year period, suggesting that the MPAA became increasingly more lenient in assigning its age-based movie ratings. Their results suggest that the overall increase arose largely from increases in violent content in films rated PG and PG-13, increases in sexual content in films rated PG, PG-13, and R, and increases in profanity in films rated PG-13 and R. They emphasize that while this ten-year period represents recent experience, it does not represent the full time scale of all films.

Comparing the amount of violence in non-animated and animated G-rated films, the authors found a significantly higher amount of violence in animated films than in non-animated films. Thompson added, “Given the possibility of long-term fear and anxieties from children’s exposure to media, physicians should discuss media consumption with parents of young children and the fact that animation does not guarantee appropriate content for children.”

The MPAA provides voluntary age-based ratings and non-standardized, descriptive rating reasons intended to inform the public about the reasons a film has received a particular rating. Thompson and Yokota found the number of MPAA rating-reasons assigned had increased on average with higher age-based ratings, but the study concluded that the lack of standardization of the MPAA rating-reasons prohibits their use in correlating the amount or types of content with specific rating reasons. This study also finds large amounts of profanity in R-rated films and some evidence that the current age-based rating categories are more lenient about allowing violent content than sexual content.

With respect to information about the depiction of substances, the MPAA did not indicate smoking as a rating reason for any of the movies in the database, although 79 percent of the films included some depiction related to smoking. The MPAA mentioned alcohol or drugs in its rating reason for 18 percent of films, while 93 percent of films included depiction or use of tobacco, alcohol, and/or, drugs, including 26 of the 51 G-rated films (51 percent). Only five percent of films contained no depictions of tobacco, alcohol, or drugs. Thompson added, “The findings clearly suggest the need for increased parental awareness about the prevalence of depiction of

substance use in films, often in ways that normalize or glamorize their use, even if the amount of depiction in some rating categories continues to decline.”

In the first ever attempt to correlate movie content with reported revenues, the study found significantly higher gross revenues for PG-13 and R rated films that received an MPAA rating reason only for violence compared to those films that did not. However, the authors suggest that looking at a crude measure of profit (revenues minus budget) for R-rated films showed better performance by movies that received only MPAA rating reasons for sex and profanity.

Thompson, who is also director of research of the Center on Media and Child Health at Children’s Hospital Boston, said, “It’s time for a significant research effort to explore the development and creation of a universal media rating system. A single system would provide the simplest tool for parents, if one can be designed and effectively implemented, and it promises greater clarity and transparency in media rating information.” She added, “The convergence of media and cross-marketing issues present major challenges to parents and rating boards, and the industry needs to lead the effort to bring its rating system into the new integrated media environment.”

Several recent examples of cross-media marketing include: *The Chronicles of Riddick* (PG-13 rated film) and *The Chronicles of Riddick: Escape from Butcher Bay* (M-rated video game); *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (TV 14 television program, DVD of collected televised episodes not rated, and M-rated video game); *Spider-man 2* (PG-13 rated movie, T-rated console video games and E-rated PC and hand-held games) and *Shrek 2* (PG-rated movie, E-rated computer game).

Thompson concluded, “Parents and physicians should be aware that movies with the same rating can differ significantly in the amount and types of potentially objectionable content. Age-based ratings alone do not provide good information about the depiction of violence, sex, profanity and other content, and the criteria for rating movies became less stringent over the last decade. The MPAA rating reasons provide important information about content, but they do not identify all types of content found in films and they may particularly miss the depiction of substances.”

The study was supported through general, unrestricted gifts to The Kids Risk Project.

The Kids Risk Project at Harvard School of Public Health strives to empower kids, parents, policy makers, and others to improve children’s lives by focusing on the risks that children face and on finding cost-effective strategies to better manage these risks. The project focuses on using an analytical approach to address risks to children. For more information and answers to Frequently Asked Questions about this study visit: [www.kidsrisk.harvard.edu](http://www.kidsrisk.harvard.edu).

## **Attack of PG-13!**

Why Hollywood wants your children

Date November 19, 2003

Liza Mundy

THE WASHINGTON POST

The white sedan was sleek and expensive, and the woman driving it looked sleek and expensive, too. Her face was heavy with makeup, her hair ambitiously coiled. She pulled up to the curb of a Loews multiplex in suburban Maryland and waited while five children got out of her car. From the front passenger's side came two girls who looked to be about 12 and 13; from the back emerged a boy of 8 or so as well as two smaller children, no older than 5 or 6.

It was a few minutes before 10 on a Friday evening. Most of the movies were starting their final, late-night showings; patrons were hurrying to the kiosk, forming a straggling line, which the children joined. The 8-year-old bought the tickets. The driver sat at the wheel of her sedan, saw the transaction completed and drove away.

Alone, the children proceeded inside the crowded multiplex, where they found their way into Theater 11. That room was almost full, occupied by a restive crowd of older teenagers and twenty somethings who were passing the time with recreational bickering. A girl got up, and a boy slapped her on the butt. Somebody shot somebody else the finger. The children found seats as the lights were dimming, arriving in time for a series of trailers, including one for a horror movie in which a busload of high school students are serially eaten, others for action movies featuring gunfire, imperiled women and massive, unexplained conflagrations.

In this, the trailers were virtually indistinguishable from the main feature: "S.W.A.T.," a police action movie that begins with a scene of armed thieves cleaning out a bank vault while terrified hostages cower on the floor. "Throw that bitch to the front and kill her!" says a thief, but before he can dispatch one particularly freaked-out hostage, she is accidentally shot in the neck by a hotheaded SWAT officer trying to rescue her. Later in the movie, a French criminal slits his uncle's throat; a helicopter full of police officers crashes to the ground in a lethal explosion; and the hero pushes the hothead ex-officer, now gone over to the side of international villainy, to a grisly death under a train.

The teenagers found all of this highly satisfying. They laughed during car chases and exulted at explosions. Meanwhile, the five young children sat, absorbing the mayhem while the woman who had driven them was -- where? On a date? At a club? At the grocery store? Asleep? It didn't matter. If their care giver was unable, just now, to give care, Hollywood was happy to help out. Come one, come all, come young and old, rich and poor, potty-trained and not. Hail the ascendancy of the PG-13 movie.

I was at "S.W.A.T.," too, in the course of sampling the ever-growing array of movies that carry the PG-13 rating, which will celebrate its 20th anniversary next year. Afterward, I found myself often thinking of that late-night drop-off at the movies. The question seemed not so much what was wrong with it as what was most wrong with it. Small children dumped on the sidewalk of a crowded theater at a time when all but the oldest should have been in bed; taking their seats in a hormonal mass of older adolescents; put in this position by a mother or aunt or baby sitter who couldn't be bothered to get out of her car to see them safely inside. What movie they saw seemed almost inconsequential. Given even this limited evidence of their upbringing, "S.W.A.T." was in some ways the least of these kids' problems.

Yet the movie itself seemed a wrong thing, too. In particular, what seemed wrong was that from the point of view of the entertainment industry, everything in that scene was right. Everything was working.

That is to say, "S.W.A.T.," that night, accomplished exactly what today's PG-13 movie is supposed to accomplish, attracting older teenagers as well as younger ones and even children, maximizing its profit-making potential by leaving no group out. Unlike R movies, which restrict any unchaperoned child under 17, the PG-13 rating means any child will be accepted who can proffer a bill, even though PG-13 movies by definition contain material inappropriate for these same young moviegoers.

Because of its broad and inclusive reach, PG-13 has become by far the most profitable rating that a movie can receive. Last year, 13 of the 20 top-grossing films were rated PG-13. Overall, PG-13 films earned \$4.5 billion in 2002, twice as much as R-rated movies, despite the fact that R films (which include fringe and foreign releases) were more numerous. Those dramatic numbers explain why the PG-13 rating is now the most sought-after by studios.

These days, you could say that there are essentially three kinds of PG-13 movies: First are movies that are teenaged through and through, but often in the worst and most puerile sense -- technically eschewing adult fare like nudity while substituting scenes that are in fact smuttier and more disturbing. Second, there are children's movies that could have been rated PG, but which have been juiced up with enough gratuitous sexuality and violence to earn them the PG-13 rating. And third, there are fundamentally adult movies, like "S.W.A.T.," whose true nature is R but which are increasingly able to make a few deft excisions and extract a PG-13 from the board charged with rating films. As a result of this last technique, says Stephen Prince, a communications studies professor at Virginia Tech, in terms of content the PG-13 and R ratings have become virtually interchangeable.

The PG-13 label has evolved into an advertisement: Studios use it to send a message to teenagers -- and young kids who long to be teenagers -- that the movie will contain cool stuff. "The industry has used the ratings system to turn a restraint into a catalyst," says Gary Edgerton, a communications professor at Old Dominion University.

Although PG-13 ostensibly serves as a warning to parents to think twice about sending their young kids, these movies are actively marketed to even the littlest children. Not officially, of course. "Young children should not be going to theaters," says Jack Valenti, the longtime head of the MPAA and the father of the modern rating system. Yet even as he says this, the hooks are being baited and dropped.

Keep in mind that this is a voluntary rating system. The Classification and Rating Administration, the board that had been created by the MPAA to bestow all movie ratings, is neither a government entity nor an independent board of, say, film experts and child psychologists. It is a panel that is owned and operated and financed by the major studios, as well as the National Association of Theater Owners, the trade group for movie theaters. Their salaries paid by the very industry they regulate, the CARA panel consists of ordinary citizens, their identities kept secret,

their only qualifications being that they (1) live in the Los Angeles area and (2) have children. From the start, the members of the CARA board have been told that they are not supposed to judge a film based on how they, personally, feel about it as parents, but to imagine how American parents in general might feel about letting children watch it. Unburdened by data or feedback -- or possibly even a passing acquaintance with Middle America -- they are asked to guess what community standards are, even as those standards are being shaped by the movies already out there.

"The board isn't saying, In my expert opinion this is acceptable for a child and this is not acceptable," explains Richard Heffner, former head of the CARA. "It's designed only to say: Most parents in our estimation will not go to their local congressman and say, 'Censor those bastards.' "

At the time of an uproar over "Gremlins" in 1984, Heffner actually felt two new ratings were needed. One would be PG-13, but another would be R-13, whereby children under 13 would be excluded. But according to Heffner, the theater owners objected to R-13. They felt they had enough to do, keeping underage theatergoers out of regular R movies. So PG-13, the less restrictive rating, won out; the rating meant "may be inappropriate for children under 13," though for years the MPAA declined to explain what elements of a particular movie, exactly, were considered inappropriate.

Why was 13 chosen as the age at which these movies magically become OK? Why not PG-14? PG-15? "We just picked it out," replies Valenti. "It could be another age. But it's -- well, why do you have 16 as the age where you can get a driver's license? It could be 15, it could be 17. It's 16 because it seemed like a middle ground between too young and older. Thirteen, we thought, is right. If you go to high school, you graduate at, say, 17; you're 14 when you go to high school. So we said: Children under 13, parents should -- some of this material should be inappropriate. Now, this could be inappropriate for a 15-year-old, or it could be inappropriate for a 10-year-old. Every child is different. We struck a middle balance, because parents can figure it out. They know how precocious or naive their child is. Only you know that."

'Shall I pay you, or would you like me to take your pants off instead?' asks a delighted female customer in "Ace Ventura, Pet Detective." "I don't know, let me think about it," smirks Ace, whereupon the woman sinks to her knees and -- we are to understand -- performs oral sex on him, to thank him for returning her parrot. Jim Carrey may be a brilliant comic, but he is also responsible for pioneering a certain kind of very skanky and now very common PG-13 movie that could not have existed in the four-ratings era.

From the start, the rules about what, exactly, could go in a PG-13 movie were fluid and undefined. According to the MPAA Web site, the main point of a PG-13 rating is to tell parents that their oversight role is paramount: "PG-13 places larger responsibilities on parents for their children's movie going," says the Web site primly, even as it gives parents little information about what these movies might contain, saying only that nudity in a PG-13 movie cannot be "sexually oriented" and that violence may not be "rough" or "pervasive." In short, there are plenty of loopholes, which Carrey and others have blasted through.

Hence, oral sex seems to be routinely acceptable in PG-13 movies: not actual oral sex, to be sure, but rather references to oral sex, oral sex performed offscreen, and oral sex that is ceased just short of being performed onscreen.

There are also bad words whose saving grace appears to be that they are not the ultimate bad word. The language rule in PG-13 movies is clear, at least in theory: One use of the f-word will automatically catapult a film from PG to a PG-13 rating. However, in a PG-13 film the f-word can be used only once, and never in its true sexual context.

But one f-word still leaves a lot of dialogue to be filled. And so directors seek other ways to enliven PG-13 language. Sometimes, they do it by crafting sleazy double entendres or they use every bad word that is not the f-word. Now, you could argue that bad language is organic to Carrey's bawdy shticks. But it bankrupts the idea -- cherished by most parents -- that PG-13 movies really do observe language restraints.

Who are these movies aimed at, anyway? Are PG-13 movies really targeted at 13-year-olds, or -- by using kids-channel stars like Brittany Murphy -- is the industry really gunning for kids who are even younger, growing their audience, as the marketers say? "I think PG-13 movies are aimed at 10-year-olds," says movie critic Nell Minow, pointing out all the marketing that's obviously directed at kids. "There's a Legally Blonde Barbie. You don't have to be a rocket scientist to figure it out."

Historically, the entertainment industry has certainly shown itself willing -- nay, eager -- to market even the most adult content to children. After the 1999 Columbine shootings, there was much discussion of whether or how cinematic shootings lead to real-life shootings, much public questioning of whether film, video-game and television companies were marketing violent entertainment to even the most tender cohort. In a detailed report, the Federal Trade Commission found that the answer to the last question was a resounding yes. "Individual companies in each industry routinely market to children the very products that have the industry's own parental warnings," concluded the report.

Movie executives took note: Responding to the negative publicity, they promised never, ever to market an R-rated movie to a child again. What they began doing, instead, was making more PG-13 movies, which could then, legitimately, be marketed to the same demographic. In a supreme irony, it was public concern about violence and its effects on children that led to more violent movies that can be, and are, marketed to children.

The problem, for anyone inclined to worry about this, is in knowing what to do. Historically, studios have been able to invoke the First Amendment to stave off government intervention. Some activists would like to see the studios sued, or sanctioned by the FTC, for deceptive advertising -- for labeling as suitable for children movies that really aren't. But this wouldn't be easy. Because the meaning of PG-13 is so vague, "deceptive" would be a hard charge to prove. Are you being deceptive when you're being imprecise? The MPAA only recently agreed to loosely define the elements that earned a particular film a PG-13 rating, and even these are sketchy descriptions like "language" or "sexual humor" or "stylized violence."

And the industry continues to work hard at obfuscation. As I emerged from a showing of "Charlie's Angels" I noticed a poster, produced by the National Association of Theater Owners, which said that the meaning of PG-13 is, "See it with your kids." When I repeat this definition to Richard Heffner, who as the head of CARA was present at the creation of PG-13, he says, wearily, "That's not what it means."

Valenti himself suggests that what PG-13 means is that parents should view all movies before their kids do, a practice that among other things would earn the industry another \$7 or \$8 per attentive parent. Others would like to see explicit labels, labels as detailed as the ingredients list on cereal boxes.

It's strange, the degree to which many of us, these days, feel the need to be warned about the entertainment we're seeking out. Strange, how movies have become something we have to feel afraid of. Strange, how Jack Valenti himself continues to favor old movies over new ones: When I asked him what he felt was a truly great movie for teen-agers, he replied, "A Man for All Seasons."

When I asked what he felt was a truly great current movie for teenagers, he replied, "I can't think of one right now."

## Study: G-rated Fare More Profitable

June 7, 2005

Family-friendly movies are more profitable than R-rated films, according to a new study.

In a follow-up to a 10-year study commissioned by the nonprofit Dove Foundation in 1999 -- which found that between 1988-97 the average G-rated film made eight times the profit of an R-rated picture -- an extension of that study found that trend continuing and expanding.

The new, expanded study examines the revenue and negative costs for 3,000 MPAA-rated theatrical films released between Jan. 1, 1989, and Dec. 31, 2003, using the 200 most widely distributed films each year based on the number of theaters.

The 15-year study throws more fuel onto the fire of the long-running debate over sex and violence in entertainment -- and whether it sells. To encourage the production and distribution of more wholesome family entertainment, the Dove Foundation commissioned the study to examine the profitability of movies broken down by their MPAA ratings to compare family-friendly movies vs. R-rated films.

"While the movie industry produced nearly 12 times more R-rated films than G-rated films from 1989-2003, the average G-rated film produced 11 times greater profit than its R-rated counterpart," said Dick Rolfe, founder and chairman of the Grand Rapids, Mich.-based media advocacy group.

The new study found that in the years after the first study was released in 1999, from 2000-03, that trend has continued. The average profit for films rated G went from \$74.2 million to \$92.3 million, PG vaulted from \$9.9 million to \$78.8 million, PG-13 rose from \$15.4 million to \$45.6 million, and R-rated films increased from \$3 million to \$17.9 million. The study notes that those increases are probably due in part to increased ticket prices, coupled with a decrease in manufacturing costs associated with videos and DVDs.

At the same time, on average more G and PG-13 films are being made and released. Since the first study was released in 1999, Rolfe noted that there has been a slight production shift toward more family-friendly films: "The production of R-rated films has dropped by 12%, while G-rated fare has increased by 38%." The average number of R-rated films released each year dropped from 105 to 93, G-rated films increased from seven to 10, PG-rated films decreased from 36 to 21, and PG-13 rated films went from 50 to 75.

Rolfe points out that the goal of the foundation and the report is not to eradicate R-rated films. "Dove is not suggesting that Hollywood produce only G and PG movies," he said. "We just think the proportionality is out of balance, given the relatively few, highly profitable family-friendly movies released each year. Our study reveals that Hollywood is not serving the most prolific audience segment in the entertainment marketplace: the family."

The study defined "profit" as estimated worldwide theatrical rentals, TV and video grosses, minus estimated negative costs, P&A and video/DVD manufacturing costs. To produce an accurate rate of return, all costs and revenue used were limited to the first 24 months from the date of each release.

"Profit" in this study does not include revenue derived from merchandising, licensing or fast-food tie-ins. If those revenue streams were included, the average profit for G, PG and PG-13 films would rise dramatically, while the average profit for R-rated films would not, because sales of toys and other licensed products are rarely associated with R-rated films.

The well-known research firm Kagan Media Appraisals assembled the data (though some results are based on Kagan's estimates of proprietary corporate information), which was analyzed by the finance department of Grand Rapids' Seidman College of Business at Grand Valley State University.

Rolfe makes the case that films can be entertaining and profitable without the sometimes gratuitous trappings that go along with an R rating. "Movies such as 'Shrek 2,' 'Finding Neverland,' 'National Treasure,' 'The Incredibles' and 'Miracle' -- all rated PG -- are action-adventure films, comedies, dramas and mysteries -- but without the explicit language and gory special effects that are rampant in R-rated movies," Rolfe said.

While an R-rated film has never been given the Dove Seal of Approval, Rolfe said the foundation has given endorsements to select R-rated films that have a redemptive message, including "Saving Private Ryan," "Schindler's List," "Amistad" and "The Passion of the Christ." "The portrayals were too explicit to meet our standards," he said in regard to the violence in those films, "but they

did have a strong redemptive message."

Over the 15-year period, Hollywood produced 123 G-rated films, which accounted for approximately 4% of the top 3,000 films and had an average profit per film of \$79 million. At the same time, R-rated films comprised 1,533 of the total, or 52% of the 3,000 films in the study, and averaged \$7 million each. The second most widely distributed film rating was PG-13, with 847 films averaging \$23.5 million in profit, while 479 PG-rated films averaged \$28.3 million.

While studio executives have long known that films with less restrictive ratings have a potentially bigger audience, the rating is not the sole driving force of the business.

"There is no question in my mind that Hollywood has been making more PG-13-, PG- and G-rated movies. Movies make huge sums of money when they work and have those ratings, since they have a much broader audience to draw from," said Tom Sherak, a partner at Sony-based Revolution Studios, who said he had not seen the report.

"But the key to the entertainment business is that movies are made for different things and different reasons," Sherak added. "Our industry tells stories, and not all of those stories are G or PG stories. There are movies that are rated R, which should be rated R, which need to be made as well."

Regarding the profitability of G-rated fare, Sherak said, "G-rated movies will always have a place in society -- films that you can take everybody to and not worry. The thing about G-rated films is they have to appeal to the parents and the kids to be really successful."

Weighing in on the ratings-profitability study, a leading entertainment investment banker said the conclusion was not unexpected. "The results are not that surprising but are in fact quite intuitive," said Lloyd Greif, president and CEO of Greif & Co., a Los Angeles-based investment banking firm. "The reason for that is G-, PG- and PG-13 rated films are widely accessible to nearly all age groups -- both in the theaters and in the after markets. By its very definition, a more restricted film is accessible by a more limited audience."

Greif added: "An adult will watch once, twice if you're lucky, but a child or adolescent or a teenager will go back to the movie or video and watch it multiple times and will not tire of the experience. If Hollywood is chasing the older teens and early 20s age demographic with R-rated product, they are missing a much greater opportunity to attract all age groups with more accessible product -- product you don't need a driver's license in order to see."

Commenting on the new study and the move away from R-rated films in recent years, Greif said, "While the shift isn't dramatic, it looks like Hollywood has gotten the message and is producing proportionally fewer R-rated films today."

While the "profit" used in the report is not the actual profit earned by a studio, the comparisons cited in the study are viable because the same factors were applied to all films. Hence, the results reflect a relative, though not absolute, assessment of return on investment.

With these qualifiers in place, for films released from 2000-03, the study maintains that the average rate of return on investment for a G-rated picture was 94.5%; PG-rated films, 72.6%; PG-13-rated films, 43.6%; and R-rated, 28.7%.

The dominance of less restricted fare also can be seen in the top 10-grossing films in the international box office: Five are rated PG-13, four are rated PG and one is rated G. "The Matrix: Reloaded" is ranked 18th and is the highest-grossing R-rated film among the worldwide box office champs, and "The Passion of the Christ" is ranked 27th and is the only other R-rated film in addition to "Reloaded" in the top 30.

Between 1988 and 2004, Buena Vista was the largest purveyor by far of G- and PG-rated films. And while it cannot be attributed solely to family-friendly ratings, the Disney distribution arm has collected more than \$1 billion in annual domestic film gross nine times in the past 11 years -- more than any other distributor.

The foundation also will attempt to make an impact on the suppliers and producers of entertainment by appealing to the investment community. Rolfe noted that in addition to the major studios, the study also will be sent to 200 mutual and pension fund administrators.

"Clearly, if Hollywood is worried about a recent decline in attendance and the resulting loss of profits, they should be producing more G- and PG-rated films," Rolfe said. "The general public is voting with their feet, heading to movies that the whole family can enjoy without having to worry about exposing themselves or their youngsters to inappropriate language or behavior,"

A complete copy of the report and all supporting documentation is available on the Dove Foundation's Web site.

By Brian Fuson  
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