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MOVIE REVIEW

'This Film Is Not Yet Rated'

Film excoriates a rating system that seemingly condones violence and condemns sex.

By Carina Chocano
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Since 1968, when the MPAA ratings system was created as a successor to the more censorious Hays Code, the Motion Picture Assn. of America has wielded enormous power over movies. Foreign, art and independent films, which can be stopped in their tracks by the dread NC-17 rating, have been particularly vulnerable to the board's mercurial decisions.

The inherent hypocrisy a system that routinely restricts films containing naturalistic sex scenes while approving films containing extreme or "cartoonish" violence, especially violence against women, for teen and young adult consumption, has long been apparent to most.

But as is suggested in Kirby Dick's documentary, "This Film Is Not Yet Rated," the MPAA is a lobbying organization for the entertainment industry, and as Theresa Webb, a UCLA researcher who has cowritten studies on violence in movies, points out, "violence sells, especially to their target demographic," even though "it's their target demographic that's most at risk for violence."

Webb is among about a dozen writers, filmmakers, lawyers, critics, former MPAA raters (the only two to break their silence since the organization's inception) and industry professionals interviewed in the movie, an impassioned piece of activist filmmaking that's as persuasive and entertaining as it is disturbing.

The suggestion is that film censorship is alive and well, if adorably dressed in sheep's clothing, and the film makes a strong — if occasionally bratty — case for change. Under the old system overseen by former U.S. Postmaster Will Hays, who was hired by the studios to keep the government's nose out of Hollywood's business, studios were required to submit scripts for approval. Under the new system, implemented to, among other things, create a single set of voluntary guidelines to replace far-flung local censorship boards such as the ones in Boston, Dallas and other cities, filmmakers are presumably free to make movies as they see fit. They submit the finished product to the board for a rating they may choose not to accept.

Actually, the process is not so benign. The difference between an NC-17 and an R can mean a difference of millions of dollars in revenue, essentially dooming a movie's prospects. Filmmakers are at the mercy of the board, made up of mysterious "parents," which does not make specific editing recommendations (that would be censorship) nor adhere to precedent but forces filmmakers to scour their films (and their consciences?) for potentially offending material.

Chronicling the organization, whose founder and longtime head, Jack Valenti, has been instrumental in passing draconian anti-piracy laws, Dick, whose previous films include "Twist of Faith" and "Sick: The Life & Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist," delves with hilarious difficulty into the MPAA's mysterious methods, which the film demonstrates to be arbitrary, tendentious and Kafkaesque in their dark absurdism. Mary Harron, who directed "American Psycho," assumed her NC-17 was for her movie's brutal chain-saw scene or perhaps its equally gory ax murder. It turns out the offending scene was the one in which Christian Bale gets it on with two hookers — and that was problematic mostly because of the sexual position. Jamie Babbit, who directed the lesbian-themed teen comedy "But I'm a Cheerleader," discovered that Jason Biggs violating a pastry in "American Pie" got an R, but Natasha Lyonne pleasuring herself (while thinking of a girl) got an NC-17. "Boys Don't Cry" earned the scarlet rating not for the rape of Hilary Swank's character but the extended orgasm of Chloë Sevigny's.

If the subject seems, at first glance, to be of interest mainly to filmmakers, it quickly becomes clear that the issue at hand has larger implications. Packed with revealing interviews with subjects including directors Harron, Kimberly Peirce, John Waters, Matt Stone and Kevin Smith and punctuated with punch-packing nuggets of graphic information, the film is organized like a mystery in which Dick hires a private investigator to discover the identities of the raters as well as their parental status. The results are at once surprising and not. Eventually, he submits the film for a rating. Not surprisingly, it receives an NC-17, which the filmmakers then appeal, leading to a surreal review process.

Clearly, Dick is on a crusade — and as such the film occasionally dips into mean-spiritedness, mocking the head of the ratings board in caricature and capturing other raters in unflattering shots. But the skewering tone seems only fitting in dealing with an organization that purports to work for the public but doesn't deign to answer to it. As singular as the MPAA's methods are, its ideology will be familiar to anyone who has ever felt bullied by the mythical "average American parent," whose prudery seems matched only by tolerance for gore and whose corporate-sanctioned "values" exert insidious power over public opinion and to some extent determine what the public is allowed to see.

What "This Film Is Not Yet Rated" ultimately reveals is what has come to stand for morality; a morality divested of all reason and humanity, speciously reduced literally to counting hip thrusts and obscenities. Dick and his subjects shed light on a group that is comfortable with violence as long as its consequences are never shown, considers even mild depictions of consensual homosexual sex more threatening than nonconsensual heterosexual sex, and a horror scene in which a woman's fake breast is cut out less damaging than a glimpse of pubic hair in a love scene.

After losing the appeal of its NC-17, Dick opted to release "This Film Is Not Yet Rated" unrated. I don't know what that means for under-17-year-olds interested in seeing it, but it sure would make for an instructive high school field trip.

"This Film Is Not Yet Rated"

MPAA rating: Not rated

Times guidelines: Contains scenes of violence and sexuality in the form of movie clips.

An IFC Films release. Director Kirby Dick. Producer Eddie Schmidt. Directors of photography Shana Hagen, Kirsten Johnson, Amy Vincent. Editor Matthew Clarke. Running time: 1 hour, 37 minutes.

Exclusively at the Nuart, 11272 Santa Monica Blvd., West L.A. (310) 281-8223; expanding to additional theaters Sept. 8.

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