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This Film Is Not Yet Rated

(Documentary)

An Independent Film Channel presentation in association with Netflix of an IFC Original and Chain

With: Allison Anders, David Ansen, Darren Aronofsky, Jamie Babbit, Maria Bello, Atom Egoyan, Stephen Farber, Martin Garbus, Mary Harron, Richard Heffner, Wayne Kramer, Lawrence Lessig, Jon Lewis, Kimberly Peirce, Bingham Ray, David L. Robb, Kevin Smith, Matt Stone, Michael Tucker, Mark Urman, John Waters, Dr. Theresa Webb.

By [TODD MCCARTHY](#)

This review was updated on Jan. 27, 2006.

"This Film Is Not Yet Rated" constitutes a ballsy expose of the notoriously secretive methods of the Motion Picture Assn. of America's ratings board; the guerrilla enterprise takes, and provokes, gleeful fun at outing the heretofore anonymous panel that decides who can see what and how far filmmakers can go with sex and violence. And yet, for all the important issues raised and pissed-off feelings unleashed, Kirby Dick's latest confrontational doc never really addresses why aspects of the ratings don't work, proposes concrete improvements or compares the system to those in other countries. Still, pic's bracing, hilarious and out-there elements make it a landmark, which will translate into heavy attention in all situations, including fests and theatrical release (rights are available), on through planned fall IFC cable broadcast.



Filmmakers Atom Egoyan, left, and Kirby Dick discuss the MPAA ratings system in Dick's doc 'This Film Is Not Yet Rated,' which preemed at Sundance.

Driving the film is Dick's zealous quest to do what's never been done before: To identify the individuals who pass judgment on most American movies' suitability for different age groups. To this end, he hires a private investigator, the jovially engaging Becky Altringer, who works with her partner Cheryl and latter's daughter Lindsey.

This team sets up surveillance outside the MPAA's HQ on Ventura Boulevard in Encino, Calif., observing cars as they come and go, trying to read license plates and following workers to lunch to eavesdrop. When they get a glimpse of the staff roster hanging in a vacant guard station, the names start to fall into place. What this actually accomplishes is highly debatable, but the score produces an undeniable exhilaration.

While this is going on, Dick serves up a lively, funny and patchy survey of MPAA ratings hijinx over the years, one bolstered by clever animation and abundant anecdotes offered by filmmakers who have felt screwed over by the ratings system instituted in 1968.

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"Boys Don't Cry" helmer Kimberly Peirce voices the commonly held charges that the board is lenient toward violence (main suspected reason: its appeal to the huge young male audience) and uptight about sex in general and female gratification in particular (the long orgasm scene with Jane Fonda in "Coming Home," which was rated R, goes way beyond what is shown to be permissible with the same rating today).

"The Cooler" director Wayne Kramer and thesp Maria Bello go off about how a glimpse of the latter's pubic hair in a sex scene earned the pic an NC-17, and Atom Egoyan shows the shot that got him the same rating for "Where the Truth Lies." Mary Harron explains the MPAA had no problem with chainsaw killing in "American Psycho" but couldn't abide a three-way sex scene. Michael Tucker, director of Iraq war docu "Gunner Palace," asks, "How do you rate reality?," and Matt Stone discusses how he and Trey Parker deliberately created NC-17 moments in their "Team America" puppet sex scene in hopes that the rest of it would be approved for an R.

Clever montages and cutting send up the MPAA's strictures about number of thrusts and distance from the camera in coupling scenes, demonstrate how the board seems much more comfortable with cartoon-like presentations of sex (like the ultra-leniently R-rated insanity of "Scary Movie") than with anything that seems tender or real, trap longtime MPAA topper Jack Valenti in multiple misrepresentations and amply show gross inconsistencies in the application of standards.

In the latter regard, the most startling revelations come from MPAA attorney Greg Goeckner, repped here in a vocal re-creation from a transcribed phone conversation with Dick prior to latter's appearance to appeal an NC-17 on "This Film Is Not Yet Rated." Goeckner informs the filmmaker he will not be told the identities of his judges, and will not be allowed to cite any precedents from previous films in his own defense.

What's at issue in all this is the ratings system's lack of transparency, of clear stated rules that are equally applied.

The need for improvement is undeniable. What's uncertain is how revealing the names and faces of the universally middle-aged, middle-class and average-looking parents who comprise the ratings board changes anything; only a moment's reflection causes one to shudder at how board members, were they prominently known, would be subject to endless lobbying, attempts at influence and even intimidation by distributors and filmmakers.

At pic's end, Dick manages to identify all the members of the ratings' appeals board; unlike the regular panel, this larger group is shown to consist mostly of exhibitors, along with a sprinkling of other industry reps (two clergy members also have a regular role).

Fine and well, except that Dick misses the cue to discuss the dominant role exhibition has played in preventing the NC-17 rating from working, along with such giant retailers as Blockbuster and Wal-Mart, as well as newspapers. Also unmentioned is how the unrated DVD now reps a massively popular market of its own.

Instead of offering constructive criticism, the film's attack mode essentially encourages the impulse to just torpedo the MPAA. Basically ignored is the likelihood that, if the MPAA dropped out of the game, every state -- and many cities -- would decide to make its own censorship decisions, and religious and extremist orgs would press their own demands, just like 40 years ago.

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A thoughtful assessment of the ratings would include a look at how other countries do the same thing. Politically oriented docs these days love to excoriate the United States while conveniently avoiding looking through other societies' dirty laundry.

As outrageous, and sometimes outrage-inspiring, entertainment, "This Film Is Not Yet Rated" is a blast. As a fair-minded look at the MPAA, it's incomplete and rather off-balance.

Camera production. Produced by Eddie Schmidt. Executive producers, Alison Palmer Bourke, Evan Shapiro. Directed by Kirby Dick. Camera (color, HD), Shana Hagan, Kirsten Johnson, Amy Vincent; editor, Matthew Clarke; music supervisor, Dondi Bastone; supervising sound editor, Frank Smathers; animated graphics, ka-chew!; supervising producer, Jessica Wolfson; associate producer, Megan Parlen. Reviewed at Sundance Film Festival (Premieres), Jan. 25, 2006. MPAA Rating: NC-17. Running time: 97 MIN.

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