

The Why Behind G, PG, R and the Rest

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"This Film Is Not Yet Rated" is a provocation, a playful polemic with some sharp edges that is not likely to make the bureaucrats at the Motion Picture Association of America very happy.

As the title suggests, it's a documentary about movie ratings and the often frustrating process whereby the MPAA warns the parents of America off films that may have too much sex, profanity or violence for the little ones. That power gives the MPAA extraordinary sway over how films will be distributed and advertised, how much money they can make and, ultimately, their impact on the culture. It is, argues filmmaker Kirby Dick, a de facto power of censorship.

The filmmaker extends his argument well beyond the weird world of film ratings, in which body parts are scrutinized and four-letter words tabulated by an anonymous panel of parents, who process them through some mysterious alchemy into the G, PG, PG-13, R and NC-17 labels. Dick argues that the MPAA is too much at the behest of the studios that founded it; that those studios are part of an increasingly and dangerously monolithic and consolidated media world; and that messages that run counter to the general rightward drift of our culture, especially when it comes to sexuality, the military and corporate interests, get squelched in the process.

For a film with this much argument in it, "This Film" is remarkably entertaining. Dick hires a cheerfully efficient private investigator, who, through stealth, persistence and basic investigative savvy, manages to shatter the carefully guarded anonymity that, the MPAA says, ensures the independence of its ratings system. The goofy narrative takes place mostly on the roads of Los Angeles, as Dick and his PI stake out an MPAA exit, collect license plate numbers, sort through trash and, at one point, photograph a conveniently untended list of important office phone numbers, through the glass wall of a security booth. There's a bit of "Roger and Me" in all of this, but it works and it makes the MPAA look rather foolish and sometimes incompetent.

This can't please the people doing the ratings. Most of them are clearly just workaday schmoes who happen to have the rather interesting job of scouring movies for the naughty bits. Surely they never expected to see their own names and faces up on the silver screen.

"I feel particularly bad about this myself, because they didn't sign up for this," said Joan Graves, who heads up the Classification and Rating Administration for the MPAA, in an interview with a critic. Graves, who gets a particular skewering in Dick's film (because she refuses to be interviewed on camera, she appears as a cartoon), says raters need to be anonymous so they can't be pressured by the studios or anyone else. Although the panel does include "senior raters" who deal with the studios and

filmmakers, Graves says she strives to find parents with school-age children who can represent the the basic values of most American parents.

Given that Dick's entire argument hinges on the lack of transparency in the system, he is unapologetic about the gumshoe work that blew these raters' cover.

"I'm just doing my job as an investigative journalist," he said in an interview.

He also argues that the basic parental values of the system are wielded more harshly against films with, say, gay sexuality than they are against "mainstream" sex. And it's clear from his film that the ratings system, set up by Jack Valenti in 1968, is very much a product of its time. Are there any gay parents on the panel? Graves says she doesn't ask about that. And why does the appeals board, which is occasionally used when filmmakers contest a rating, include a Catholic and a Protestant "observer"? No Jews? No Muslims? No atheists?

Graves acknowledges that there may be some tinkering in the future with some of the process, but an MPAA spokesman insists that whatever changes are coming were in the works long before Dick's documentary.

Still, it's hard to believe that the film, which is not rated, won't draw blood. Critics and many moviegoers have long argued that violence in American films is treated more leniently than sex, that exposing tender youth to chain-saw killings is fine, but two boys kissing sets off the alarm bells. That, too, may reflect American values more than conspiracy on the part of the MPAA, but there's the philosophical problem: Independent filmmakers are often in the business of challenging American mores, yet they are rated by a system that serves a broad, commercial and relatively conservative consensus on most political and cultural hot topics. And without a rating -- or with the dreaded NC-17 -- they find it difficult to compete for the entertainment dollars that keep filmmaking alive.

Parents who find the ratings system useful will wonder if Dick has any better ideas, beyond transparency, for reforming the ratings process. And the exuberant proliferation of new and challenging documentaries in recent years suggests that for all their malfeasance, the big bad studios and their water carrier, the MPAA, haven't entirely silenced independent voices.

But it will be interesting to see how they approach the serious questions raised by Dick's new opus. Patrician indifference? Outrage? Reform? You can hear the folks at the MPAA squirming, even if they won't admit it.

This Film Is Not Yet Rated (97 minutes, at Landmark's E Street Cinema) is indeed not rated. It includes graphic sexual content, which is mostly concealed by on-screen black bars.

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