

Choosing Private Ryan

Movie ratings alone **may not** be the best way to determine if a film is appropriate for your children. But there are other ways to find out more about the films your kids want to see.

PG-13 PARENTS STRONGLY CAUTIONED

Some material may be inappropriate for children under 13

by Larry Widen

Trivia question for movie lovers: In what year was the PG-13 rating first used? Give yourself bonus points if you can name the film that inspired its creation.

Although it's been nearly 40 years since the Hollywood movie studios began to monitor the amount of sex, violence and vulgarity in films, parents still find themselves wondering exactly what's being depicted in the latest releases.

Many parents rely on the familiar Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) rating system, a service the association has provided since 1968. The MPAA designation is commonly found within a movie's advertising, usually in a box that contains the picture's overall rating, such as PG-13 or R, followed by a short descriptor that talks about the type of violence, language or sexual situations found in the film.

Currently, the following rating categories are used by the MPAA:

G – General audiences

PG – Parental Guidance Suggested
Some material may not be suitable for children

PG-13 – Parents strongly cautioned
Some material may be inappropriate for children under 13

R – Restricted
Under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian

NC-17 – No one under 17 admitted

Each motion picture studio allows the MPAA to pre-screen their films for the association's official rating. According to Joan Graves, the MPAA's Chairman of Classification and Ratings Administration, any film scheduled for release in the United States is viewed by at least

nine board members, all of them parents. Immediately after the screening, the members convene to rate the film based on a set of guidelines that covers intensity, context and graphics.

"Ultimately, our goal is to rate films the way we think most American parents would rate them," Graves says.

When the members of the MPAA board feel a film is overly violent, they may use the term "pervasive violence throughout" when justifying the "R" rating. This is done to differentiate one kind of violent film from another.

Graves compares the recent horror film "Resident Evil 2" with the historic tale "Kingdom of Heaven." Although both films were rated "R," that's where the similarity ends, Graves says. For that reason, the MPAA described "Kingdom of Heaven" as having "violence and epic warfare," while "Resident Evil 2" had "non-stop violence with language and nudity."

Graves says parents may choose to weigh the violence in films such as "Saving Private Ryan," "Glory," "Black Hawk Down" or "Schindler's List" against the historical or biographical value.

"We exist to provide a point of reference," Graves says. "The MPAA strongly encourages parents to use our ratings and then have discussions with other parents, church members or anyone else whose

opinions are aligned with their own."

Carlo Petrick, communications manager for Marcus Theaters, agrees wholeheartedly.

"The MPAA ratings are nothing more than guidelines," he says.

"Parents can use them to do as much research as they feel is necessary before letting their child see a film," Petrick says. Marcus requires anyone attending an R-rated film to be at least 17 years old or accompanied by an adult.

He says the circuit has a long-standing policy of checking IDs before tickets are sold for R-rated films.

"We do allow a parent to sign a permission slip stating it's alright for their child to see a particular film without them," Petrick says. "But the parent has to personally come to the box office, and the slip is only valid for that day and that film."

Spinning the ratings

Chris Foran, assistant entertainment editor for the Milwaukee *Journal Sentinel*, says studios usually provide the MPAA description of the film's content as part of the press materials that go out to mainstream media.

"A lot of the rating descriptions become subtle marketing ploys," he says. "The movie's content descriptions reflect the audience a particu-

lar film is being marketed to."

Foran says the rating information for "XXX: State of the Union," a PG-13-rated action movie, contains the phrase "Sequences of intense action violence and some language."

"What better way to tell a male teen audience exactly what they want to hear," he says.

Foran says the *Journal Sentinel* makes a concerted effort to take the spin out of the descriptions and put them into everyday English so parents have more information on which to base their decisions. "We think the information we provide is helpful, but in the end, parents have to use their own judgment."

Foran says studios today will fight tooth and nail with the MPAA to get a PG-13 rating, a remarkable change in strategy from a decade ago. The studios used to want an R rating because their research indicated teens thought PG-13 films were for kids. But all that changed after the shootings at Columbine High. As theater owners became more diligent about checking ages, studios saw a measurable decline in revenue.

"Teenagers generally determine the opening weekend gross for a film," says Foran. "If the kids can't get in to see an 'R' film, the box office suffers." He adds that most of the top-grossing films in the last few years have been PG-13.

Recently the School of Film, Television and Digital Media at the University of California, Los Angeles reviewed the 100 top-grossing films of 1994, including "Ace Ventura: Pet Detective," "Dumb and Dumber," "Four Weddings and a Funeral" and "Pulp Fiction," as part of a comprehensive study to determine if the

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MPAA's rating system is adequate in today's world. Their findings, published in May by the American Academy of Pediatrics, concluded that one of every five films rated PG actually has more violent actions than the average for those listed as PG-13, or inappropriate for children under 13. The study suggested the motion picture industry needs to provide more consistent information on violent content and add a "quantitative component" to the ratings — to better describe the amount and kind of violence portrayed.

MPAA's Graves said that while UCLA's research has merit, the study's parameters did not align with the MPAA's set of metrics.

"The UCLA study measured the number of violent acts in a film, but did not address the intensity," she says. "Consequently, cartoon violence counts the same as a live action shooting."

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The impact of viewing violence

Michael McBride, MD, a Milwaukee area child and adolescent psychiatrist, supports a greater parental role in choosing movies. "It comes down to doing a little research and using common sense," he says. "Having more information leaves you better equipped to decide whether your child should see a film."

McBride is concerned about the amount of violence that adolescents are exposed to in a normal day.

"It's not just the movies," he says. "It's the movies in tandem with video games and television that add up to an overload for a young person's mind."

McBride says it's being proven that

children are becoming more and more desensitized to violence. He points to several recent studies that measured the area of the brain that reacts to violence.

"The brain is naturally hard-wired

to be repulsed by violence," says McBride. "These studies are showing that brains exposed to too much violence are developing new pathways that circumvent the natural empathetic impulses, thus allowing the brain to say, in essence, 'Violence or aggression is okay.'"

McBride says only time will tell as to how pop culture influences are really affecting our children. "This is the first generation that's being measured for this."

There are a number of resources available to parents who are concerned about their children's exposure to adult content. Joan Graves encourages parents to visit the MPAA's websites, mpaa.org and filmratings.com, for concise, easy-to-understand explanations of why films are rated the way they are. In addition, websites for the Family Style Movie Guide (familystyle.com) and Kids in Mind (kids-in-mind.com) provide detailed descriptions of all violent and sexual scenes in films. Because no single rating system is perfect, these websites can help parents evaluate whether or not a film is appropriate for their child's current level of maturity. If, after doing the research, there's still some uncertainty, it's recommended that the

parent view the film first before deciding.

By the way, if you're interested in the answers to the trivia question, the PG-13 rating was created after parental backlash over the violence in "Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom." "Red Dawn," starring Charlie Sheen, Patrick Swayze and C. Thomas Howell, released in August 1984, was the first film to officially hit the theaters with the new rating. Ironically, "Red Dawn" was also entered into the Guinness Book of Records as having the most acts of violence in any film up to that time.

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