

## Poorly rated



**John Patterson**

The Guardian, Friday 11 August 2006

---

**A** [larger](#) | [smaller](#)

---



### Rating the raters ... This Film Is Not Yet Rated

I didn't know it until recently, but I've been waiting a long time to see a documentary like *This Film Is Not Yet Rated*, director Kirby Dick's riveting account of the inner workings of the secretive and corrupt Motion Picture Association of America and its incomprehensible - and often reprehensible - movie ratings system. For years now, I've nursed dark suspicions about this weirdly arbitrary, unfair system and its anonymous officers, its Opus Dei-like arrogance and paranoia - and about its deleterious effect on movie culture in particular, and American culture in general, in the 40 years since its modernisation by its powerful chieftain Jack Valenti, who retired two years ago. And now Kirby Dick has proved every last one of those suspicions. It's so nice to be right.

TFINYR opens with a dazzling list of all the film-makers who've had their work interfered with by the MPAA Ratings Board since the system was overhauled in 1968, largely in an effort to keep the government out of the film-censorship business. It's an impressive list when one considers what artistic giants such as Martin Scorsese and David Lynch have had to put up with from this self-styled bunch of "parents and educators", whose names and functions have hitherto been wrapped in an obscurity worthy of certain religious orders and espionage organisations.

The ratings system appears transparent at first. And indeed, the G, PG and PG-13 ratings categories are straightforward enough. It's when one enters the upper echelon,

unpleasant, because these ratings actually have an impact on ticket sales and a film-maker's ability to market his own work successfully.

An R-rated movie automatically has its potential audience reduced by age limits, which is a choice the film-maker appealing to adults must make. The NC-17 rating, however, is a veritable mark of the beast in movie distribution circles: newspapers often won't accept advertising, and exhibitors often aren't keen to screen them. No wonder critics see the NC-17 rating as a weapon only used against independent movies, never the studios' product. The MPAA is, after all, a business association backed by the seven major studios themselves.

Dick went all-out to penetrate the workings of the MPAA, hiring private detectives to squat for months outside the MPAA's compound in Encino, California, conning receptionists out of departmental phone lists, taking down car number plates, following employees home or to restaurants after screenings, and gradually drawing up a full list of "raters" and MPAA officers.

Then, having assembled a draft version of his movie, featuring the observations and complaints of film-makers like John Waters, Matt Stone and Trey Parker (here's the place to see those puppet-sex coprophilia sequences from Team America, people!), among others, and including shot-by-shot comparisons of similar scenes from R and NC-17 movies, he submits the results to the MPAA for their opinion. Predictably, they shoot him down with an NC-17 and assure him it's highly unlikely he'll see it reduced on appeal.

Dick's coup de grâce comes in the final moments of the movie. His detectives run down the names of the appeals board members - the inner sanctum of the censorship priesthood, and when he runs them across the screen, our remaining illusions are exhilaratingly shattered. Every one of them is a major functionary at one of the top studios, cinema chains or distributors: Landmark, Sony, Loews theatres, Regal Entertainment and so on. All of these people may be parents and concerned citizens, as the MPAA claims. Not one of them is without a deeply vested interest in the present status quo in film censorship.

The system is rotten and corrupt to the core, and thanks to Kirby Dick, we can all now see it plain.