

# The Science of Bleep

## Snappy doc exposes rating-board secrets

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published: August 22, 2006

Why we choose to watch the movies we watch is strictly personal, a matter of taste mediated by finance and geography. The nature of what we can watch is something else. As explicated by Kirby Dick's snappy exposé *This Film Is Not*

Details:

**This Film Is Not Yet Rated**

Directed by Kirby Dick

IFC, opens September 1, IFC Center

*Yet Rated*, it's a matter of public concern. Dick (whose previous docs include *Private Practices: The Story of a Sex Surrogate*; *Sick: The Life & Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist*; and the Oscar-nominated *Twist of Faith*) has an interest in outré content that *This Film Is Not Yet Rated*

pushes further into the social sphere. Establishing that the American movie industry has always been subject to political regulation, Dick notes the 1920s importation of Republican politician Will Hays to police Hollywood and the postwar witch hunt conducted by the FBI and House Un-American Activities Committee, to focus on the current rating system implemented in the late '60s by D.C. insider and former Motion Picture Association of America honcho Jack Valenti.

The rating system is secret and the raters—identified by Valenti only as "parents"—are sworn to secrecy. Dick studies the circumstantial evidence and interviews expert witnesses, including filmmakers Kevin Smith, John Waters, and Kimberly Peirce (who hasn't completed another film in the seven years since her re-edited-for-R *Boys Don't Cry*). His conclusion: The scarlet NC-17 is, as an economic kiss of death, reserved largely for independents. Also, so far as the MPAA is concerned, the representation of female pleasure is far worse than the depiction of violence—particularly violence against women.

Any investigation into Hollywood inevitably mutates into a noir. Dick hires an affably hard-boiled private eye to discover who the raters are and how they operate. Assisted by her teenage daughter, she stakes out the MPAA's heavily secured Hollywood headquarters and takes license numbers. Selective garbology yields a rating sheet for *Memoirs of a Geisha*. Although MPAA's anonymous minions dutifully tally the pelvic thrusts in a sex scene or total instances of the word *fuck*, their guidelines are secret; they pride themselves on not telling filmmakers what changes would be necessary to secure a PG or R. (They're not censors after all.) Mary Harron recalls that although *American Psycho* was rated NC-17 for "tone," she ultimately deduced that, for all the movie's violence, the most MPAA-offensive scene was a lighthearted threesome.