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EDITORIAL

Rated R, for Obscure Reasons

Given the large role they play in shaping the culture, it is remarkable how little is known about movie ratings. Who decides whether a movie is rated PG or NC-17? What criteria do they use? How does the appeals process work? Those are some of the questions posed by an illuminating new documentary, “This Film Is Not Yet Rated,” directed by Kirby Dick. Mr. Dick’s film makes a compelling case that there needs to be greater transparency in the ratings process, and significant reforms.

The ratings system is operated by two industry groups, the Motion Picture Association of America and the National Association of Theater Owners. The system is private, but the public has a strong interest in it, since the ratings play a large role in shaping movie content. Films rated NC-17 can have a hard time attracting audiences. Producers are often willing to make substantial cuts or changes in movies to get a more commercially viable rating.

Mr. Dick’s documentary investigates how the ratings system works, and the picture is not pretty. Most of the raters are anonymous, so the public cannot assess whether they are qualified or impartial judges. In the movie, Mr. Dick goes to elaborate lengths to learn the raters’ identities. One thing he turns up is that even though the M.P.A.A. says they are all “parents,” some, perhaps many, are parents of adult children, hardly what the M.P.A.A. has been suggesting when it says it has parents evaluating films for other parents.

Mr. Dick also uncovers serious problems with the ratings procedures. When he appealed the NC-17 rating first given to his own film, he was informed, remarkably, that he could not cite the ratings given to other movies in his argument. He also learned that the appeals board has long had representatives of the Catholic and Episcopal Churches — but never of any other religions.

“This Film Is Not Yet Rated” also argues that there are built-in biases — that studio movies are treated more leniently than independent films, that gay-themed movies are more likely than other movies to get NC-17 ratings for the same kind of content, and that the system deals more harshly with sexual content than violence. Because the standards are so nebulous, it is not hard to believe that some of these biases enter into ratings decisions.

The current M.P.A.A. president, Dan Glickman, inherited the system when he took office two years ago. He said in an interview that the system is under review and volunteered that some aspects — like not allowing appealing parties to cite other movies and allowing only the Catholic and Episcopal Churches to send representatives to the appeals board — need to be changed. Mr. Glickman deserves credit for being open to reform, but he should think expansively. There is no legitimate reason, for example, for the raters to be anonymous.

It is questionable whether the movie industry should be in the business of rating movies at all. It might make more sense to simply make information about content available, and let parents make their own assessments.

If there are going to be movie ratings, they should be done through a fair and open process. After the revelations of “This Film Is Not Yet Rated,” the burden is now on the M.P.A.A. to give its ratings system a serious upgrade.

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