



salon.com

To print this page, select "Print" from the File menu of your browser

Beyond the Multiplex

An interview with "This Film Is Not Yet Rated" director Kirby Dick. Plus: The "real" Warhol and the Clint Eastwood of Japan.

By Andrew O'Hehir

Aug. 31, 2006 | Most adult filmgoers never think about the Motion Picture Association of America's movie ratings. I mean, who really cares? We live in a country with constitutionally guaranteed freedom of expression and no state censorship, so adults can pretty much see whatever they want.

Almost all grown-up-oriented flicks you're likely to see at the big shopping-center theaters are rated R. You might take the kids to something that's PG-13. Cartoons and Disney flicks are rated PG. If you're one of those people who reads this column and goes to see deviant foreign-language films at that funky quasi-bohemian theater with couches, good coffee and yeast-flavored popcorn, well, those movies don't even bother getting rated in the first place. (After all, it's a voluntary system.) So there's no problem, right?

Not so fast, bub. As documentary filmmaker Kirby Dick is here to tell us, there's a big problem. Dick's intriguing and often hilarious exploration of the MPAA's super-secret ratings board, "[This Film Is Not Yet Rated](#)," makes the dimensions of that problem clear. As industry insiders have observed for decades, the ratings system distorts the film landscape, maybe subtly and maybe not so subtly. It privileges certain kinds of content over other kinds, ensuring a steady flow of hyperviolent but strangely puritanical entertainment into the nation's megaplexes and living rooms.

For any movie with hopes of finding a mass audience, the R rating is critical. Many newspapers won't carry ads for adult-oriented films with an NC-17 rating, many theater chains won't show them and Blockbuster and Wal-Mart won't carry them. Films made by the six major studios are carefully crafted for the R rating, and as Dick's film demonstrates, the supposedly anonymous parents on the MPAA ratings board often work closely with studio executives during postproduction to guarantee the right result. As I mentioned earlier, foreign films and small-scale American indie pictures bypass the entire process, thereby exiling themselves to the art-house circuit (which, delightful and important as it is, accounts for less than 5 percent of the movie screens in the country).

So who's penalized by the ratings board? Almost every artistically ambitious director who wants to work both inside and outside the Hollywood system, who wants to tackle challenging material without giving up wide distribution and the possibility of reaching a large popular audience. From

Stanley Kubrick to Martin Scorsese to Pedro Almodóvar to Mary Harron to Darren Aronofsky, from "Midnight Cowboy" to "Scarface" to "Pulp Fiction" to "Kids" to "Boys Don't Cry," it's hard to find a director or a film who created a culture-shifting moment and *didn't* fall afoul of the MPAA ratings system.

Dick's film is already notorious for its "gotcha" factor -- with the aid of a private eye, he outs almost all the current members of the MPAA's ratings board -- and controversial for its snarky, goofy manner. (You can also read Stephanie Zacharek's [review](#) today.) But he's fundamentally a serious filmmaker with bedrock indie credentials -- his work includes the 2005 "Twist of Faith," about a clerical sexual-abuse case, and the 2002 biopic "Derrida" -- and when I caught up with him on the phone the other day, while he was waiting to board a plane in Los Angeles, he sounded like a man with a mission.

"You know, most Western European countries have film ratings boards too," he tells me, "and they have people with training in child development issues, training in psychology. Their principal concern is the effect of violence in media -- that is, the effect it may have on young people.

"The MPAA's approach is just the opposite. These people, these supposed 10 Los Angeles-area parents" -- as we learn in Dick's film, the raters are not all the parents of young children the MPAA claims they are -- "have no training, no background in any relevant fields. It's a secret system and a completely non-transparent system. So you have to ask yourself, what are they hiding? There's no way to evaluate this ratings process, but I think it's interesting that the type of films the studios make get less restrictive ratings than the films that independent producers, who are their competitors, make.

"The reason that the ratings board goes easier on violent content than on sexual content, in my opinion, is that violent films are what the studios make, and what they market to adolescents. Independent and foreign films are more focused on adult relationships, which includes adult sexuality."

Critic Jack Mathews, now of the New York Daily News, has argued for many years that the MPAA penalizes depictions of consensual adult sexuality in serious dramatic films, in favor of a farcical, juvenile, teen-comedy vision of sex. One notorious recent example, covered in Dick's film, is the 2003 movie "[The Cooler](#)," which was stamped with an NC-17 rating because of a tender, intimate sex scene in which actress Maria Bello's pubic hair is briefly visible. (Director Wayne Kramer, with Bello at his side, appealed the decision and lost.)

Dick agrees with Mathews' assessment, but sees a new pattern, which may be specifically aimed at placating aggressive activists on the right, who are always eager to demonize Hollywood as a den of liberalism and immorality. "In particular, gay sex is much more highly restricted than straight sex," he observes. "It's almost a full rating more restrictive." His film includes a compelling montage in which similar scenes are set next to each other, with the heterosexual image invariably resulting in a less restrictive rating.

In "[But I'm a Cheerleader](#)," the ratings board found a masturbation scene offensive, possibly because the teenage girl in the scene is fantasizing about another girl. That scene is far more chaste than the infamous one in "American Pie" in which a hetero teen boy satisfies himself with the aid of recently baked pastry. That film received an R rating, while "But I'm a Cheerleader" got an NC-17.

As director Kimberly Peirce tells Dick, the MPAA board asked for cuts in a sex scene in "[Boys Don't](#)

Cry" where all we can see is costar Chloë Sevigny's face. Of course, Sevigny's character is being orally pleased by Hilary Swank's character at the time, and seems to be enjoying a delirious orgasm. The clear message, Peirce says, was: Not too much female pleasure, please, it makes us uncomfortable.

"It might not be an accident that the way the ratings board comes down on gay sex happens to help the MPAA in Washington," Dick says. "The motion-picture ratings are only a small part of what the organization does. The larger part of what they do is their lobbying presence in Washington, where they have recently been quite successful in getting a lot of onerous copyright and piracy laws passed. By coming down hard on films with gay sexual content, that allows them to curry favor with precisely the people who are the most uncomfortable with homosexuality and who hold the balance of power on Capitol Hill."

I'm not terribly encouraged by Dick's suggestion that what America needs is a European-style nanny-state ratings board packed with accredited experts on child development. Despite his assertions, most of the research that claims to identify negative effects of media violence is nebulous at best, and I can't get excited about exchanging one form of de facto censorship for another. At the same time, every parent (myself included) wants some nonjudgmental shorthand method to tell material that's *clearly* not for kids apart from material that might be.

As Dick says, if the NC-17 didn't virtually crush a film's commercial prospects -- if it were purely an advisory notice that a movie contained "adult" material, and that it might not be OK with your Aunt Hattie or your 6-year-old niece -- it's hard to see how anyone could complain. But right now we have a secret process in which certain films (mostly major studio films) are rewarded, and others (mostly ambitious, quasi-independent productions) are punished, all for reasons nobody gets to know about. As Newsweek critic David Ansen puts it, this isn't designed to protect children, it's designed to turn us all into children.

"This Film Is Not Yet Rated" opens Sept. 1 at the IFC Center in New York and the Nuart in Los Angeles; Sept. 8 in the New York and Los Angeles metropolitan areas; Sept. 15 in Baltimore, Boston, Chicago, Palm Springs, Calif., Philadelphia, Phoenix, Portland, Ore., and Washington; Sept. 22 in Austin, San Diego and Seattle; Sept. 29 in Cleveland, Minneapolis, San Jose, Calif., and Tucson, Ariz.; Oct. 6 in Denver and Salt Lake City; and Oct. 13 in Nashville, with more cities to follow.

"Andy Warhol: A Documentary Film": The man who created the world we live in, damn him

I have long maintained that the most important cultural figure of the 20th century was Elvis Presley, and that the devolution, for better or worse, of Western civilization into what critic George Steiner calls the "post-culture" is not a matter of Auschwitz or the Bomb but rather of "Hound Dog." Ric Burns' new four-hour documentary on Andy Warhol, which will play in New York for two weeks before its two-night broadcast on PBS, causes me not to abandon that view, perhaps, but to reconsider it.

In trying to rescue Warhol's real history -- if that isn't a laughable concept -- from the myths and the wigs and the starfucking and the parties and the Velvet Underground records and the inscrutable surface of both the work and the man who produced it, Burns has accomplished something both remarkable and reassuring. Remarkable because this is a compelling film, blending astonishing historical images with long-winded talking-head interviews, in vintage Burnsian style, and reassuring for almost the same reason. Even a phenomenon as vaporous, as self-erasing and as intentionally

devoid of content as Andy Warhol can become the subject of an earnest, often beautiful and occasionally flatulent biopic by one of the Burns brothers. What will they do next? A movie about God? A history of oxygen?

No one should mistake "[Andy Warhol: A Documentary Film](#)" for a work of neutral, objective, critical inquiry. I don't think that's a problem. To make any kind of reasonable film about someone whose friends, colleagues, family members and artistic executors are, in many cases, still alive, and whose work is surrounded by a protective institutional bureaucracy and still covered by copyright, Burns needed to get maximal cooperation. So big-ticket Warhol intimates like fashionista Diane von Furstenberg and art dealer Larry Gagosian are on board as executive producers. Nearly all the intellectual heavy lifting in the film comes from interviews with writers and critics sympathetic to and friendly with Warhol, most notably Dave Hickey, Wayne Koestenbaum, Bob Colacello, Stephen Koch and Donna De Salvo.

Bias is only a problem when you're trying to conceal it, and perhaps the price for getting to see all this extraordinary archival material in one place is listening to narrator Laurie Anderson intone endlessly about the revolutionary brilliance of every Warholian brain-fart. In any case, the more you watch "Andy Warhol," the more you are reminded that any possible criticism you might want to make of Warhol is in there all along, intimately tied up with the things that made him an important artist.

Wasn't Warhol just a cynical opportunist without any original ideas of his own, an ingenious commercial artist and celebrity-obsessed social climber who became famous for capturing, distilling and reflecting back at us the brightly colored packaging of the pop-culture universe? Well, yes. Other than the word "cynical" (which I would agree is inadequate to capture Warhol's combination of naiveté, solipsism and ruthlessness), even Warhol's most avid defenders would probably accept everything in that sentence. The Campbell's soup cans were not his idea, and neither were the paintings of Marilyn. All he did for the Velvets was give them a place to play and score drugs; his avant-garde films, whose merits are hotly debated among art-heads to this day, essentially involved turning the camera on and watching what happened.

Even as Burns signs on with the official Warhol hagiography -- the film anoints him as the most important artist of the 20th century, and the only possible response is that it depends what you mean by "important" -- he doesn't turn away from various possible indictments of Warhol, as a man and an artist. During his years of maximum influence and importance, Warhol was a notoriously cold fish who stood by impassively as one after another of his Factory coterie destroyed themselves with drug abuse (Eddie Sedgwick was only the most celebrated).

After he was shot by Valerie Solanas in 1968, as Robert Hughes has written, Warhol's "lines of feeling were finally cut; he could not appropriate the world in such a way that the results meant much as art." His last 15 years of life, at least, were spent in a Studio 54 haze of celebrity worship and anesthetic industrial production, during which he became a camp follower of the Shah of Iran and then (after the Shah fell) Ronald and Nancy Reagan. Hughes rightly mocks a late series of prints titled "Ten Portraits of Jews of the Twentieth Century," which featured images of Franz Kafka, Gertrude Stein and Sarah Bernhardt. (That's without even mentioning Warhol's brief career pitching Puerto Rican rum, or his "Love Boat" guest appearance.)

But Burns and the wide circle of Andy's acolytes he draws upon are able to make the vividness of

Warhol's revolutionary period (from about 1962 up to the Solanas shooting) seem real again, and almost as shocking as it was the first time. Those soup cans and Marilyns are taught in every art history class now, right after Picasso and Matisse. But Warhol, for all his refusal to speak about his own work with any intellectual rigor, was the first serious artist to understand that the culture that produced those guys was breathing its last rattling gasps, and that "high art" was a subset of pop from now on.

Famous as he was, Andy Warhol was never as famous as he wanted to be, and therein lies the pathos of his story. If he revolutionized the art world by selling the image of hipness and celebrity -- principally and ultimately his own -- he could never quite escape the relatively tiny demimonde of New York bohemia, with its art critics and art dealers and art-history textbooks, and become an honest-to-God celebrity. The first half-hour of "Andy Warhol," documenting the childhood of a poor, painfully shy, effeminate and extraordinarily talented boy from Pittsburgh -- who suffered from St. Vitus' dance (and perhaps from a mild form of autism) and whose Polish-Slovak immigrant parents could barely speak English -- will break your heart.

Andy's older brother, a stolid, balding fellow named John Warhola, tells us in his old-school Pittsburgh accent that when their mother was recovering from a devastating cancer operation in the late 1930s, he had to feed Andy lunch every day for months. The adored youngest son of the Warhola clan came home to their cramped two-room apartment each afternoon and heard the latest news about Mama's convalescence. John would fix him a sandwich, and heat up a can of tomato soup.

"Andy Warhol: A Documentary Film" opens Sept. 1 at [Film Forum](#) in New York. It will air on PBS' "American Masters" series as two episodes, Sept. 20 and 21. (Check local listings.)

"Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles": The Clint Eastwood of Japan, on a long journey of reconciliation

One of those protean artists who's hard to sum up or get a handle on, the Chinese director Zhang Yimou seems to want to reinvent or at least reorient himself with every new picture. After the international successes of the martial-arts costume dramas "[Hero](#)" and "[House of Flying Daggers](#)," it seemed as if Zhang had found a new style, an action-packed counterpart to the grand melodramas of his earlier career, like "Ju Dou" or "Raise the Red Lantern."

In fact, his new film, "[Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles](#)," represents a third stream in his career, the understated and intimate character drama aimed more at Chinese audiences than the international film market. Other examples have included "[Not One Less](#)" and "The Road Home," and, like those, this new picture will reach only a few devoted American spectators. That's too bad, because once you get used to the apparent flatness and emotional reserve of this picture, it's a sad, slyly comic tale of family trauma and reconciliation that packs a wallop.

Zhang's entire agenda in making this film apparently involved creating a part for the great Japanese actor Ken Takakura, an impassive he-man type sometimes called the Clint Eastwood of Japan. Playing Takata, a fisherman from a remote Japanese village who must travel into China's mountainous Yunnan province to fulfill a promise made by his estranged and desperately ill son, Takakura justifies the director's confidence. With scarcely a crack in his granitic expression, as rocky as the spectacular Yunnan scenery (wonderfully captured by cinematographer Zhao Xiaoding), Takakura conveys an entire internal world of paternal anguish.

Takata is officially traveling to China to find a performer of folk opera whom his son, an academic, promised to film doing a traditional work titled "Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles." But the opera singer (a real performer named Li Jiamin) is in prison, with a young estranged son of his own in a distant village, and Takata's lonely thousand-mile journey begins to digress like a shaggy-dog story or an 18th century novel, taking him ever deeper into a strange land where he doesn't understand the culture or speak the language.

Prison authorities, balky tractor engines and unreliable cellphone signals -- every few minutes, Takata must phone his translator (Jiang Wen) to get him out of yet another incomprehensible situation -- block the way, but ultimately Takata finds Li's son (Yang Zhenbo) and prepares to bring him to his father. (Zhang has always found terrific child actors, and Yang is no exception.) But no one has asked the boy if he actually wants to go, and he and Takata end up lost, deep in the Yunnan canyons, with a boat whistle, a digital camera and absolutely no language in common.

Don't worry, "Riding Alone" is not the kind of film where really terrible things happen to innocents. But that's not to say there isn't an inexpressible core of sadness at its center. The nearly wordless connection that forms between this fatherless son and this childless father in the movie's latter stages may leave you blubbering, partly because you'll understand that, like all human passions, it will last only a short time. In its resolutely unhistrionic way, this is one of Zhang's best films, and an entirely new kind of role for Ken Takakura. (I'm not even going to pretend to rank it among his 203 other films.)

"Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles" opens Sept. 1 in New York and Los Angeles, with a national release to follow.

This story has been [corrected](#) since it was originally published.

-- By Andrew O'Hehir

[Salon](#) | [About Salon](#) | [Contact & Help](#) | [Corrections](#) | [Advertise in Salon](#) | [Salon Personals](#) | [Salon Jobs](#) | [Salon Mobile](#) | [Salon Newsletter](#) | [RSS Feeds](#)

Salon Premium: [Premium log in](#) | [What is Salon Premium?](#)

[A & E](#) | [Books](#) | [Comics](#) | Community: [Table Talk](#) & [The WELL](#) | [Life](#) | [News & Politics](#) | [Opinion](#) | [Sports](#) | [Tech & Business](#) | [Letters](#)

[Investor Relations](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Terms of Service](#)

Copyright ©2009 Salon Media Group, Inc. Reproduction of material from any Salon pages without written permission is strictly prohibited. SALON® is registered in the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office as a trademark of Salon Media Group Inc.