

Movies are important. Good or bad, it's definitely true: movies influence what we wear, what we eat, how we talk, and what we say. They manipulate our expectations for the future, and alter the way we see parts of the world. In this country, pop culture is king, and movies are sitting right smack on the throne.

Because they're important, because they influence, the American ratings system is vital. If, like me, you still won't go in the ocean because of seeing "Jaws" too early, or if you worry that the adult-only humor embedded in a PG movie like "Shrek" will make it through to your kids, you know what I'm talking about – it's important to be aware of what you're getting into before you go to the theater.

And yet, there's a lot of concern that the people who assign movie ratings aren't getting the job done. Last week, Entertainment Weekly published an article about how screwed up the American ratings system is. The writer, Mark Harris, made some very good points about the problems the ratings system is facing. But he's not even close to being the first: critics have been denouncing the system for years. One even made a documentary about how harebrained the ratings board is, and called it "This Film is Not Yet Rated."

It's been a very long time coming. The whole saga of the ratings board is a pretty interesting one, if only because so much of what the film industry did, they did to themselves. Many years ago, in the 1930's, certain religious groups began to make noise about censoring the movies. They felt that film was getting away with too much immorality, and began to apply pressure to the government to step in and fix it.

So, to prevent government involvement, Hollywood decided to censor itself. An organization called the Motion Picture Association of America was formed and put in charge of keeping movies in line. The MPAA made a very strict list of do's and don'ts, and the studios followed the rules. No theaters would carry any films that didn't have the MPAA's approval.

That worked for a while. But after a couple of decades, the 60's happened, and more and more people sought to make movies about whatever they wanted, with or without the board's approval. And that's when someone had a good idea: instead of censoring movies, let people make movies however they chose, and simply come up with a system for rating them. Let viewers know how much violence, sexuality, bad language, etc, each movie had, and let people decide for themselves if they wanted to see it.

It was a great idea forty years ago, and it's a great idea today. But the MPAA has always rated subjectively, with no standardized rules. A board of "ordinary citizens" just sort of feels things out. They're not filmmakers, they're not government, they're not necessarily diverse in their backgrounds, races, and lifestyles. (If you'd like to know just who they are, rent "This Film is Not Yet Rated. The director actually hires a private eye to expose them.) And after so many years of feeling things out, the board has wandered too far away from its purpose.

Now, instead of rating every movie so people can decide how they feel about going to see it, the board has begun to serve more as a tool of censorship. Studios show a movie to the board, and the board decides on a rating. Then the studio trims the film to fit the rating that they feel will make the most possible money. The studios tailor the movie for the board, and in return the board tends to sort of let them get away with...well, murder. Critics of the system have pointed out that the big studios to get preferential treatment from the MPAA board, and they're not wrong. And because the board is so useless, the

ratings have become useless, too.

Look around: these are the days of what critics are calling “torture-porn” genre, movies like *Hostel* and *Saw* and the upcoming *Captivity*, which are mostly about all the different ways you can horribly, horribly kill a half-naked young adult. But between board-ordered trims and studio wheedling, these days any film can get any rating it really wants. These movies have all managed to finagle an “R” rating, despite showing...well, if you really want to know, Harris describes a few scenes in his article. I prefer not to discuss the brutal torture scenes, especially since my mother reads this column.

There are things that need to be done to fix the MPAA board. It needs to be more diverse, and they need a published, standardized set of criteria for ratings and an appeals process for the filmmakers who want a chance to defend their art. And I have to say – why isn’t there at least one filmmaker on this board? Wouldn’t you rather have a person who went to medical school tell you about a medical problem?

But there’s a more immediate solution, and it is where Mark Harris and I disagree. The *Entertainment Weekly* writer argues that we should dump the NC-17 rating and just provide more information on every movie’s content. He thinks we should leave it up to the parents to research their kids’ movie choices and decide whether or not to allow them to go.

And I think Mark Harris is so naïve, it’s adorable. Hasn’t he ever gone to a 9 PM screening of “28 Weeks Later” or “Knocked Up,” and seen parents with their 8-year-olds? I have. (By the way, parents, please remember: better to spend that \$30 on a babysitter now than spend hundreds of dollars on therapy when the kid is 17. Weigh it.) We need to fix the board, but while that’s going on we should be bringing back the NC-17 rating. The MPAA needs to actually start handing it out, despite studio pressure. That rating was designed for movies that are too graphic to earn an “R,” and there’s no reason why the *Hostel III* didn’t get it. Then the theaters need to actually start enforcing the ratings system, because at the end of the day, they’re responsible for who gets in to see what.

Is that a perfect solution? No. But just because we don’t have a perfect solution doesn’t mean there isn’t a better solution than what we’ve got now. And please remember: movies are important. They’re influencing us, whether or not we notice. So be careful what you’re watching.

<http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,20042869,00.html>