

The MPAA:

How the System Works and a Comparison With Europe, Represented by Norway

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Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) is the organization that rates movies in the USA. Movie ratings are voluntary, but in order to get a movie shown in theatres a rating from the MPAA is necessary. The MPAA rates movies based on the content of the movie. The purpose of the rating is to guide parents in the jungle of movies out there. In fact, parents themselves do the ratings. Ideally, the rating panel in the MPAA shall consist of people who are parents to younger children. This essay however will prove that what are supposed to be the advantages with the MPAA might not be that rosy in real life.

Furthermore, what is rated as not suitable for minors to watch in the USA is not the same across the Atlantic Ocean. When comparing the same movies' ratings in the USA and Europe one can see that the American rating system is stricter on sexual content than the European. Some people also claim that the Europeans are stricter on violent content than the Americans. It might seem like the Americans view violence as better for children to watch than two people making love to each other.

This essay will tell the story of the MPAA including its history and its position today. In addition to the facts about MPAA as an organization, it is important to include the critical voices regarding the American rating system. Furthermore, it is interesting to compare the MPAA to a similar system in Europe since there are certain clear and interesting differences.

### **The history of the MPAA**

According to MPAA's own website, the major motion picture studios in the USA founded Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association of America in 1922, so that the government not should enforce motion picture censorship. A name change and the MPAA as we know it today came in 1945. In the 1960s, the movie industry and the American cinemas went

through a change. After the Civil rights movement and women's fight for their rights, the American society became more open to all kind of artistic freedom. Jack Valenti was named the MPAA president in 1966, and remained in that position for 38 years. In 1968, Valenti enforced the voluntary rating system, as we know it today. The purpose of this rating system was and is to inform parents about the content of movies, and at the same time protect moviemakers' freedom of expression. "The idea was to give filmmakers as much artistic freedom as they wanted, but to provide moviegoers with some indication of the nature of a film's content (Baran, 2010, p. 153). In later years, the MPAA has also engaged in copyright issues. Nevertheless, their main goal according to themselves was and is to work for American parents and the movie industry.

### **The MPAA – how it works**

Any local, state or federal government does not rule the MPAA. The only purpose of the non-profit organization is to work as a guideline to parents. The MPAA looks at language, sex, drug use, violence and other factors that it is naturally that parents care about in a movie. It is voluntary for a moviemaker to get his or hers film rated, however; the theatres require that the movie is rated by the MPAA before it is shown. Hence, a rating from the MPAA is an economic factor to the movie business as well as a controlling organ. The rating system, which was enforced in 1968, divides movies into five categories:

- G - general audiences
- PG - parental guidance
- PG-13 – parental guidance. Children under the age of 13 should not watch this.
- R - restricted; no one under 17 years old is admitted without guidance by an adult

- NC-17 - no children under 17 years old, not even accompanied by adults

(Baran, 2010, p. 153).

The board of raters shall, according to Jack Valenti and the MPAA, consist of eight to thirteen members. These members are kept secret and anonymous, but they shall be parents to children between the age of 5 and 17 and have no connection with the movie industry. Senior members lead the rating board and are not kept secret, these members can have older children. The rating board members' job is to rate a movie on behalf of all the other parents in the USA, also called 'the average American parent' when it comes to the content of movies. The process is as follow: the board watches the movie one or two times, each member fills out a ballot on behalf of 'the average American parent' and finally the board vote on the rating. Then the moviemaker is informed with the decision of the MPAA and what part of the movie that forced the decision. The moviemaker has the opportunity to edit further and get a re-rating. It is common that a moviemaker edit his or hers movie in order to obtain a certain rating. If the moviemaker disagrees with the MPAA's decision, he or she can appeal the rating of the film. According to The Classification & Rating Administration (CARA), the rating board views 800-900 films every year, but only a dozen are appealed and only one-third of those again are overturned (filmratings.com, 2010).

### **Reasons for movie ratings**

So, why do the Americans have the MPAA, and why do movies get ratings? The mission of the MPAA is to act on behalf of American parents when it comes to the content of movies. The ratings shall work as a guideline to parents who want to take their children to a movie. According to CARA, is it a common misunderstanding that the MPAA rates a movie on whether it was a

good or bad movie, but that is wrong (filmratings.com, 2010). The MPAA rates a movie based on the content and how suitable that content is for children to watch. Drug use, language, nudity, sex and violence are examples of things the MPAA watches for. Children should be protected from certain movies because of violence, sex or other inappropriate aspects. At the same time, freedom of expression is highly valued in the USA and moviemakers should be allowed to make the movie they want. That is why a rating system like the MPAA is needed in today's movie industry.

It is common sense that children should not watch all the same things as adults. An American 2010-study about elementary school children showed that 76 % of the children in the study had been frightened by a movie. More than one-third of the movies named by the children in the study were actually movies rated G or PG. Frightening movies had for instance led to sleeping disorders (Cantor, Byrne, Moyer-Gusé and Riddle, 2010).

There is no secret that children react to what they are watching, that is why rating systems were implemented in the first place. Nevertheless, it is hard to rate movies. The Europeans tend to rate looser on sexual content than the Americans, and according to *This Film is Not Yet Rated* (2008), Americans tend to rate looser on violent content than the Europeans. What is worse, violence or sexual content? And what are the effects on the children. Scholars try to find out, but it is difficult if not impossible, to find a clear answer. However, according to the 2010-study by Cantor et al. it might seem like the American ratings maybe are not strict enough.

### **Critics of the rating system**

There are several critical voices to the MPAA and the rating system as it works today. Many critical arguments are presented in the documentary *This Film is Not Yet Rated*. First of all, the

movie questions why the members of the rating board are kept anonymous. The MPAA is the only movie rating system that is kept secret in the entire world. So, a hunt for the members begins. A private investigator is hired, and in the end the documentary can identify the entire rating board. Furthermore, the documentary set question mark with the term 'average American parents'. What is an average American parent? Are minorities, gays and single parents represented? What about income and political views? It turns out that the rating board in 2006 consisted of upper class Caucasians, with either children over the age of 18 or no children at all.

Many moviemakers are interviewed about the rating system, which they regard as unfair. According to the people cited in the movie, the MPAA favors big movie studios compared to independent moviemakers. Also, it is claimed that the MPAA rates stricter because of gay sex scenes than straight sex scenes, and that a woman's pleasure portrayed in a movie get a stricter rating than a man's. These accusations are actually illustrated with statistics; several movies are compared and those with gay sex scenes overall get the strictest ratings.

Furthermore, the question about sexual content versus violent content is opposed. According to the documentary, the NC-17 rating is given four times as often due to sexual content rather than violent content. Also, as this assignment will prove later, the situation is different in Europe. In Europe, sex and nudity are seen as something natural, and nothing that requires a strict rating.

Other critics say that that the MPAA ratings are not consistent. A 2004-study at Harvard School of Public Health compared MPAA ratings with ratings from other organizations on the same movies, and found big differences. For instance: the MPAA mentioned alcohol or drugs in its rating reason for 226 films, while Screen It! identified depiction or use of tobacco, alcohol, and/or drugs in 1211 films for all movies released between January 1, 1992 and December 31,

2003” (Thompson and Yokota, 2004). (Screen it! offers movie ratings to parents through subscription). The study concludes that movie ratings and the actual content of the movie not always show a relationship.

### **USA and Europe – a comparison**

It is interesting to compare movie ratings in the USA with movie ratings in Europe. Since Europe consists of a wide range of countries with no shared system when it comes to movie ratings, it is useful to choose *one* country to do the comparison with. I have chosen Norway; first of all since this is a country I have first hand knowledge about, but also because it is a country with a movie rating system that can be described as *European*. The ratings in Norway are similar to the ones in for example the UK, Germany and the rest of Scandinavia. It is possible to say that Europeans tend to share the same view on nudity, sex, drug use, violent and other factors when it comes to motion pictures. In Norway, it is the Norwegian Media Authority that rates movies. The Norwegian Media Authority is a governmental but independent monitoring body for all media in Norway. The movie rating system in Norway is divided into the following ratings:

- All - everyone can see the movie
- 7 years - children from 4 years with an adult
- 11 years - children from 8 years with an adult
- 15 years - children from 11 years with an adult
- 18 years - no children under the age of 18

(Norwegian Media Authority, 2010)

As seen in *This Film is Not Yet Rated* sexual content receive stricter ratings than violence in the USA. In Europe, the tendency is the totally opposite, according to the movie. However, after research on a fair amount of movies showed in theatres the last decades, I find the statistics fairly different from what *This Film is Not Yet Rated* claims.

Without a doubt, it is true that movies with sexual content receive stricter ratings in the USA than in Norway. *American Pie* (1999) and *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) are clear examples of this. The former received the 11-rating in Norway, which means that children down to the age of 8 years old are allowed to watch the movie together with an adult. In the USA however, the same movie was rated R, which means that parents should think twice before they bring their children to this movie. Also, children under the age of 17 years old are not allowed into this movie without adult guidance.

*Brokeback Mountain* is an even better and more significant example. In *This Film is Not Yet Rated*, it was stated that gay sex scenes are treated even stricter than straight sex scenes. *Brokeback Mountain* contains gay sex. The movie received the R-rating in the USA. In Norway however, the exact same movie received the 7-rating. This rating literally means that 4 year olds can watch this movie with parental guidance. It is obvious that Europeans, and Norwegians in this example, view sexual content in motion pictures clearly different than the Americans.

On the other side, when it comes to violent movies, there are not as big differences between Europe and the USA. *This Film is Not Yet Rated* claims that the Europeans are much stricter on violent content than the Americans. However, this is not what I found. The 18-rating is very seldom used in Norway; it is actually not been used the last two years (Norsk Rikskringkasting, 2010). Hence, the strictest rating a movie receives in Norway is the 15-rating.

When I compared several movies' ratings, I found that the same violent movie most often receive the 15-rating in Norway and the R-rating in the USA. So, there is not a really big difference. However, it is discussable which one of the 15 and the R is the strictest. With the 15-rating, children down to the age of 11 can get in with an adult. With the R-rating, which means restricted, it is up to the parents whether they want to take their children or not. The rating says that no children under the age of 17 are allowed without parental guidance, and that parents *should* not bring their younger children. Nevertheless, younger children might watch the movies due to not-so-strict parents. Yet, this is only speculations and not facts. Even though there is not a strong enough tendency in rating differences, I did find some movies with differences in the ratings given. Basically, some movies that are given the PG-13 rating in the USA, which means that children must be accompanied by an adult and that some of the content might be inappropriate for children under the age of 13, are given the 15-rating in Norway, which means that one have to be 15 years old or 11 years old together with an adult. For example, *Titanic* (1997), *The Dark Knight* (2008) and *The Ring* (2002) were all given the PG-13 in the USA, against 15 in Norway.

When one compare Europe's, represented in this case by Norway, and the USA's movie ratings one can see that the Americans are stricter on sexual content than the Europeans. However, that Europeans are stricter on violence than the Americans are not that obvious. It might be the case that American parents are less strict on taking their children to violent movies than European parents, however this is hard to find out and would be a totally other research paper, which would definitely be interesting to read.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the MPAA works as a guideline to parents who want to take their children to a movie. Language, drug use, nudity, sex and violence are some of the things the MPAA watch for. Based on the movie's content, the MPAA rates the movie according to what age the movie is suitable for.

There are many critical voices to the MPAA. Some claim that the system favors the big studios instead of independent moviemakers. Others say that MPAA is stricter on certain things, such as gay sex scenes. Moreover, studies have shown that the content of the movie and the rating given by the MPAA do not always correlate.

*This Film is Not Yet Rated* claims that the MPAA rates stricter on sexual content than violent content. Also, it is said that the situation in Europe is the totally opposite. However, after a small study, comparing American ratings of certain movies with the European (represented by Norway) ratings of the same movies, it does not seem that this is the case. It is true that movies with sexual content receive a lower rating in Europe than in the USA, but the violent movies do not get over all stricter ratings in Europe. Why the Americans are stricter on sexual content in movies than the Europeans is an interesting issue suitable for further research and discussion.

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