The rating game

With the latest summer flicks full of violence and sex, critics say Hollywood is pushing the envelope too far in making films for kids

By Louise Kennedy, Globe Staff, 6/30/2002

Imagine for a minute that you're on the movie ratings board. You see movies containing the following scenes, and you rate them PG, PG-13, or R. Which is which?

A man's head is cut off and his young son finds it.

A man is impaled and dies; we see blood in his mouth.

People's eyes are cut out and we see the empty sockets.

A man caresses his wife's bare back.

In order, the actual ratings are: PG ("Star Wars: Episode II - Attack of the Clones"), PG-13 ("Spider-Man"), PG-13 ("Minority Report"), and R ("Monsoon Wedding").

If this makes you wonder what's going on with movie ratings, you're not alone. This summer's crop of PG-13 movies that push the upper edge of that rating - not just "Spider-Man" and "Minority Report," but also "The Bourne Identity" and "The Sum of All Fears" - has renewed charges from parents' groups, researchers, and other observers that Hollywood is suffering from "ratings creep." Though there are examples of a shift in every category - even G movies, a recent study found, contain more violence than parents expect - it's the lucrative and fuzzily defined PG-13 category that's drawing the most fire.

"That is the no man's land of the ratings system," says Nell Minow, who created Moviemom.com as a way, she says, to give parents the information that Hollywood ratings don't. "There's a huge, huge disparity," she says, between so-called "soft" PG-13s, which get the rating for an F-word or a single fight
scene, and "hard" PG-13s, whose pervasive violence or crude sexual humor may be only a cut or two away from an R.

At the same time, Minow notes, PG-13 is the most desirable category for producers. "It's really kind of the sweet spot in terms of box office," she says. "PG is probably too babyish for adults and certainly for teens; R, you're obviously cutting out a lot of the teenagers. So PG-13 is probably where most of them want to be."

The strategy seems to be paying off. In four of the last five years, according to the box-office tracking service Nielsen EDI, seven of the 10 highest-grossing films were rated PG-13. It's such a coveted rating that filmmakers have even been known to bump a film up from PG by throwing in a swear word, as reportedly happened with the Drew Barrymore version of Cinderella, "Ever After."

The pressure to make movies PG-13 became more intense, some observers say, after the Federal Trade Commission slammed Hollywood in September 2000 for marketing R movies to children under 17. The movie industry agreed to stop such practices as showing trailers for R movies at lower-rated films. Follow-up FTC reports have found improvements; the latest one, which was scheduled for release Friday, was expected to contain similar findings. But some industry critics say that rather than winning the war, they've just had to switch battlegrounds - from inappropriately marketed Rs to inappropriately intense PG-13s.

"I think it's outrageous for the FTC to say that things are getting better," says Daphne White, whose nonprofit Lion & Lamb Project advocates against the marketing of violence to children. "Things may be getting a little better at the margins," she says, noting such improvements since the first report as the inclusion in movie ads of brief phrases explaining a movie's rating. "But the reasons are so vague," she says. "And parents have no recourse. Who do you complain to?"

Parents would be tougher

If parents did find someone to complain to, says researcher Douglas Gentile, they'd have plenty to say. Gentile, a developmental psychologist and the director of research for the National Institute on Media and the Family, surveyed parents for a study published in the journal Pediatrics last year. When he compared parents' opinions of 276 movies with the ratings those movies got from the Motion Picture Association of America's ratings board, he found that only 60 percent of movies rated PG-13 struck parents as completely acceptable for teenagers.

For 8- to 12-year-olds - a group that includes many PG-13 viewers - the results are even more striking: Only 5 percent of PG-13s received a "green light" for this age group; 30 percent got a yellow light, meaning parents would advise strong caution before letting a child see it, and 65 percent got a "forget about it" red-light rating.

Why the disparity between MPAA ratings and parents' perceptions? After all, MPAA president Jack Valenti says that most parents find the ratings useful. "I get very few letters from parents who are upset,"
he says. But all that means, Gentile argues, is that "parents like ratings. But people would like better ratings better." He and others argue that there are many reasons for the increasing gap between what parents think PG-13 means and what a PG-13 movie actually contains.

For one thing, Gentile says, because audiences have grown "desensitized" by pervasive violence - not just in movies but on TV and throughout the culture - "it takes a larger jolt to get kind of the same effect." So moviemakers create more graphic or realistic violence, or they combine violence with sex or humor "to increase the shock factor." A ratings description, however, would still just say "violence."

Rod Gustafson, who runs a Canada-based Web site called grad

idingthemovies.com, agrees that he's seen new combinations and twists in the eight years since he started rating movies for parents. "They're creating new ingredients - a lot more verbal sexual innuendo, for instance, and very explicit sexual innuendo. ... We've had to struggle with new things." And the ratings board, he thinks, sometimes struggles, too. It used to be, for example, that more than one use of the F-word, or even a single use as a verb, would rate an automatic R. "So they're using the finger, they're mouthing it. It's amazing how creative they can be."

It's also "amazing," says Jane Horwitz, "what you can see in PG-13." Horwitz writes "The Family Filmgoer," a syndicated parents' guide that appears in the Globe. "The rule seems to have become: You can show practically anything as long as you don't show blood and guts. ... Apparently, people don't have blood in PG-13 movies."

**Of mice and cheese**

One problem with the current system, many researchers and observers say - and one that they think parents don't always grasp - is that the ratings board is not independent of the movie studios. The parents who write to him, Gustafson says, "don't understand that this is the mouse guarding the cheese." The MPAA is made up of the seven big Hollywood studios, and it's the MPAA that oversees the ratings board - a group of anonymous parents whose identity is a closely guarded secret.

"This is the basic problem, and there's no way of putting it gently," says Aris T. Christofides, editor and publisher of the rating site kids-in-mind. com. "The MPAA is the studios' lobbying arm, essentially." That's why, Christofides says, a George Lucas movie can include a decapitation and still get a PG rating, or a Spielberg movie can cut out Tom Cruise's eyeballs and stay PG-13. "It's power," Christofides says. "It's George Lucas. He's making a lot of money for the studio. ... And once George Lucas pushes the envelope, everybody can."

Because that kind of envelope-pushing is what sets the precedent for the next ruling, critics point out, the system is not one of objective standards, but rather one of relative judgments. "It's a system that wants to appear rigorous and cast in stone," says Kevin Hagopian, a lecturer in media studies at Penn State, "but a better metaphor might be that of a conversation" between filmmakers and raters. "What you have," he says, "is not a list of do's and don'ts as much as a series of precedents."
Gray areas and red flags

Indeed, says Jay Landers, there are no hard and fast rules for the ratings board to follow - and he should know, because he served on the board from 1990 to 2000. "There's a very sketchy framework that's been written out by Jack Valenti," says Landers, a social ethicist. That framework includes only a few specific criteria, such as the F-word rule. Even then, though, the board can vote by a two-thirds majority to override those rules for a given film.

And what sometimes happens, Landers says, is that a film is recut and resubmitted so many times in hopes of getting a different rating that "filmmakers can wear down the board. ... Once you see something five or six times, you can feel, well, maybe they've done enough."

Besides, when it gets right down to PG vs. PG-13 vs. R, Landers says, "There is no hard and fast line between any of these categories. It's all a continuum. And there's a gray area between the categories." The board doesn't have to rate a film unanimously, either, Landers says, and it will often use the brief descriptions that accompany ratings as a way to hint that the vote was split on that film. (See "Red flags in the fine print," above right.)

"The board is very careful about how it picks its words, and there is a lot of meaning from the board's point of view," Landers says. But do parents grasp those subtleties? "I don't think they do," he says. "There are certain PG-13s that as a rater, you say, 'Geez, these ought to be restricted for 8 and unders.'"

But they're not restricted, except by parents who say no. Failing that, any 4-year-old can see anything listed at the top of this article - except, of course, the man caressing his wife.