

Teen Film Censorship Considerations and a Diatribe Against Violence

Nicholas Warren

It is no secret that teens, as a group, love films. Any visit to the theatre is bound to confirm that fact – from the frequent presence of teen-oriented arcades adjoining theatres, the pushing of candy and junk food, lights and sounds, enormous posters of teen-oriented films, and large crowds of teens in any ‘cool’ movie which they can get into, whether legally or not. Yes, it may come as a shock to no one that teens often sneak into restricted movies at theatres—heck, even this author has done it. The fact that Hollywood explicitly markets r-rated/over 18 and NC-17 films to teen and even child audiences—as proven by a release from the US Federal Trade Commission (2000)—may also not come as a surprise. But what effect does teen viewing of ‘inappropriate’ film material have? What is inappropriate film material for teens? These questions, and more, are part of an issue confronting any YA, collections, or teen-film club coordinating librarian, and that issue is censorship.

As Price (2000) notes, film censorship is an issue which goes back to the beginnings of film itself. The 1930s saw both the growth of Hollywood and a drive to limit the content of films to avoid ‘poisoning the minds’ of impressionable youths

and corrupting the moral fabric of society. Until the 1960s, all Hollywood films were screened by the Hays Office, and even phrases such as “oh god,” were limited or cut out. After the 1960s, with the introduction of liberalization, freedom of speech movements, changing values and other factors, the film industry switched to a ratings system and left the question of film appropriateness largely in the hands of parents. This is the (modified) system still used today in both the American and the American-dominated Canadian markets.

The reasons which parents, teachers, officials and librarians have for censoring or not censoring a film have been diverse. As Sova (2001) recorded in her book *Forbidden Films: Censorship Histories of 125 Motion Pictures*, these reasons run the gamut, from the traditional sex and violence exclusions, to more complex exclusions involving politics and religion. Censoring on religious or political grounds seems to fill a certain grey area. Should librarians censor in this way? Should teens be denied access to films which depict controversial political or religious views? It is the opinion of this author that, in most cases, the answer should be no.

Let's look at *Triumph of the Will* as an example. *Triumph of the Will* is a classic Nazi propaganda film which depicts Hitler rallying Germans, including youth, to his horrible cause. This film has no depicted violence or sex, but it does display strongly controversial political imagery – that of Nazism – and religious imagery – basically nationalism as religion. Despite, and indeed because of, these themes, there should be no reason to censor *Triumph of the Will*, for several reasons. Firstly, any North American teen who views this film does not live in Nazi Germany, and thus is not capable of falling under the sway of Nazism. Secondly, it is important for teens to recognize what went wrong in the past, to help prevent such events recurring in the future. A surefire way to accomplish this is to allow teens to view *Triumph of the Will* in an environment of education and discussion. What this means is that, as long as teens are first made aware of the horror of the Nazi state, the Holocaust, and so on, watching *Triumph* should only enforce that horror. Moreover, most teenagers are unlikely to fully grasp the depths of Nazi politics and then be able to go off and use them in a political setting. Exposing faulty political and religious views in a controlled environment such as a teen film club, is much safer than allowing teens to view a more sinister kind of film: that which actively promotes and glamorizes gratuitous violence.

Perhaps the most sinister occurrence in teen film today is the over abundance of pointlessly violent

movies. These movies are largely marketed towards teens, and many teenagers often end up seeing them. After all, what could possibly be cooler than 'heroes' such as Arnold Schwarzenegger going around killing bad guys and blowing things up? Just harmless fun, right? Not quite. Overly violent American films, as Gregg Easterbrook (1999) discusses in his excellent article "Watch and Learn," are a big problem.

A number of 1990s films which Easterbrook notes for their particular popularity with teens and pro-violence messages include: *Scream*, where teens gruesomely kill fellow teens; *Natural Born Killers*, which depicts random homicide as fun; *Pulp Fiction*, which depicts hit men as cool; and *The Basketball Diaries*, which depicts (then) teen heart-throb Leonardo DiCaprio killing his high school classmates. Other films which can be added to the list include *Sin City*, for being an all-out gore-fest; *300*, for the same reasons; *Blackhawk Down*, a nice piece of American military propaganda; and so on. These are just a small sampling of violent films which are, at least in part, marketed towards and viewed by teens on a regular basis. Indeed, taking into consideration television and film, "the average American boy or girl will observe 40 000 dramatizations of killing by age 18" (Easterbrook, 1999, 23).

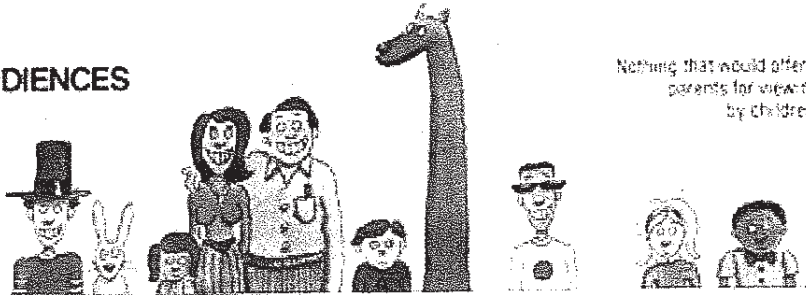
Of course, very few teens who are exposed to violent films will actually go out and enact what ...ARTICLE CONTINUES ON PAGE 45

What Everyone Should Know About The Movie Rating System.

GENERAL AUDIENCES

G

G GENERAL AUDIENCES
All Ages Admitted

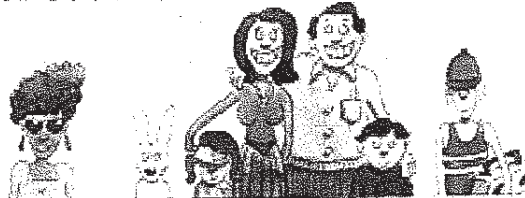


Nothing that would offend parents for viewing by children.

PARENTAL GUIDANCE SUGGESTED

PG

PG PARENTAL GUIDANCE SUGGESTED
Some Material May Be Inappropriate for Children Under 10

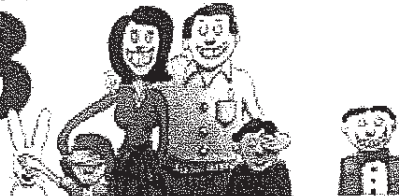


Parents urged to give "parental guidance." May contain some material parents might not like for their young children.

PARENTS STRONGLY CAUTIONED

PG-13

PG-13 PARENTS STRONGLY CAUTIONED
Some Material May Be Inappropriate for Children Under 13

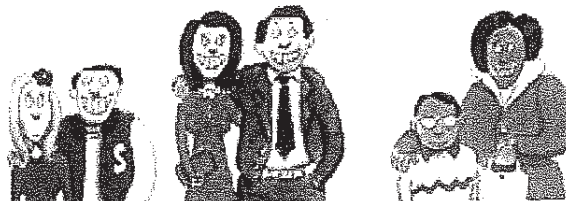


Parents are urged to be cautious. Some material may be inappropriate for pre-teenagers.

RESTRICTED

R

R RESTRICTED
Under 17 Requires Accompanying Parent or Adult Guardian

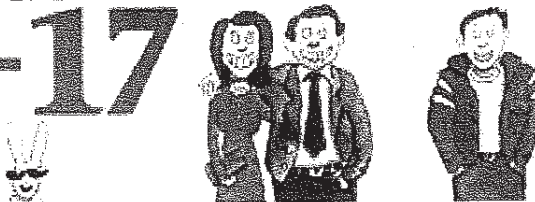


Contains some adult material. Parents are urged to learn more about the film before taking their young children with them.

NO ONE 17 AND UNDER ADMITTED

NC-17

NC-17 NO ONE 17 AND UNDER ADMITTED



Patently adult. Children are not admitted.

...CONTINUED FROM PAGE 43

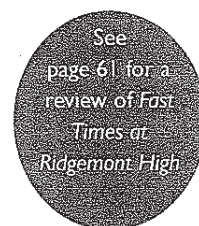
they see on screen, but there are a number of reasons why people opposed to the censorship of violent films should reconsider their position. First of all, it is highly possible that a youth who is 'raised by television' (or, increasingly, by computers), allowed or able to watch whatever he or she wants, spends little time with friends and family, and, therefore, gains a large proportion of his or her knowledge of the world from potentially violent media, will see the world through this narrow lens. The lens I refer to, which Easterbrook (1999) writes of, is that of violence as 'normal.' Secondly, studies, such as those by Eron (1999) have shown that youth who view violence demonstrate increased aggression, and youth who watched the most TV and film growing up, from the 1960s to the 1990s, were much more likely to be arrested and convicted of violent felonies. What makes this study even more powerful is that the sheer volume of violence in both television and film has only increased in the later twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Adding to the findings of Dr. Eron is the fact that TV and movie-related violence and killings have been frequently documented. For example, murders have been committed by people who followed scenes from *Child's Play 3* and *Natural Born Killers*. Additionally, the Columbine tragedy was a dramatic, action-movie-like display which could never have taken place without Hollywood-fueled action film examples for the killers to follow, a child was killed in a death relating to the TV show *Power*

Rangers, and recently, as remarked by McCarthy (2006), youth have held illegal 'fight clubs' based completely on the movie *Fight Club*.

Despite evidence of the problems with violent film and media, and their influence on youth, many consider it overblown – and they have a point. Some film censorship critics will insist that, while there has been violence and death directly relating to film in the western world, you don't see hordes of youth going around killing people and being action heroes. Instead, you see many teens enacting film-violence fantasies in the form of computer and video games, many of which are patterned directly or indirectly off of movies, you see youth getting in the odd fight – just as they always have —or, perhaps, you see high school graduates joining the army and killing people legally. Will these outlets be enough to contain all the teen-absorbed, media-generated violence of our society? Or, will the ever increasing film violence of titles such as *Sin City* take us to a level and acceptance of violence only experienced in times of war?

Or, will it have little effect at all, as youth are simply desensitized to it and don't consider it as a possible reality? It seems time will tell.

Another common area of censorship is that based on offensive language. There is a lot of swearing in today's Hollywood films. Indeed, the presence of swearing in teen films, or films seen



by teens can be shocking from a conservative standpoint. In one example, as calculated by *Family Media Guide*, the Oscar-winning film *Crash* features over 180 swear words. *Saving Private Ryan*, a popular American World War II film shown in prime time on television is another example. This arguably important historical film has twenty occurrences of the 'f' word (Sharp, 2004). Foul language in teen film is not limited to war movies and obvious action movies. The film *A Walk to Remember*, a movie about teens and religious faith, also contains a fair amount of swearing (Fahsholz, 2005). A more obvious example teen film, which is laughably rated 'R,' is *Not Another Teen Movie*. This film contains an assortment of talk which, in days gone by, only sailors would tolerate.

Censoring for profanity in films can be a tough call. Modern western teen society is no stranger to profanity. Go for a walk around your local high school or even junior high school grounds, and you will hear the language of profanity spoken – in some case fluently. Moreover, perhaps since Clark Gable's famous line "frankly my dear, I don't give a damn," in *Gone with the Wind*, members of all age groups have become more comfortable with swearwords (Easterbrook, 1999). On the other hand, many teens, and others who overhear teens, are still offended by many curse words, particularly those made famous by comedian George Carlin (sh#t, p#ss, f#ck, cu#t, c#cksucker, motherf#cker and t#ts). If you are worried about

the level of profanity in a film you are considering showing teens – or the level of sex and violence – go to <http://www.familymediaguide.com>, plug-in your film and you'll see just what level of each you're dealing with.

A final common area of teen film censorship is sex. Sex is everywhere in western society, at a level arguably greater than any other censorable quality. Teen magazines such as *Seventeen* show sexy role models on their covers, teen pop stars sing songs about sex while dressed sexily, teen TV shows discuss sex, and teen films frequently have sex as their hook or plot focus. Teen movies like *Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle*, the *American Pie* series, *Van Wilder*, *Super Troopers*, *Road Trip*, *Student Bodies*, and others all feature gratuitous sex, as coveted by lusty youth. All this sex can be an issue with critics of our over-sexed world, those fearful of teen pregnancy, STDs, moral corruption and so on – an issue which makes censorship decisions regarding teen films all the more difficult.

It is too easy to just cut out any film with sexual content. Some films, such as *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, depict sex in a fairly realistic fashion. *Ridgemont's* characters are depicted as awkward teens dealing with sex in high school, often for the first time. These are depictions which many high school teens who attend your film club or group may be aware of, or perhaps need to be aware of. If a teen is feeling lost and confused about sex, perhaps because they've never done it

before, witnessing characters in a popular, mainstream teen film having awkward sex could certainly be a comforting experience. Deciding on censorship of more outlandish films like *American Pie* can be more difficult than it may first appear as well. While *American Pie* is full of sexual references and depictions of sex, they tend to be fairly funny, over-the-top, or educational in their own right. That said, in addition to its sexual content, a film such as *American Pie* has enough drug abuse, alcohol abuse, and swearing to make it hard to recommend for older teens; and impossible to recommend for younger teens.

Just like violent film production, perhaps over-sexualized film production should be cut back considerably. In the meantime, be careful when including films with sexual content in your teen film programs. If you are including some, consider sticking to those with educational or artistic merit – as opposed to gratuitous sex.

When deciding which films to show to your teens, choose wisely. You must ask yourself: which is truly worth censoring, a controversial film like *Triumph of the Will*, or a violent film like *Reservoir Dogs*? Should you censor *American Pie* for its sexual content, based on the view that it perpetuates a debased, hyper-sexualized society? Or are you confident that teens can handle it? The choice is up to you.

References

- Easterbrook, Gregg. (1999). Watch and learn. *The New Republic*, 22-25.
- Eron, Leonard D. (1999). *Effects of television violence on Children: testimony before Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation regarding safe harbor hours in TV programming*. Retrieved April 4, 2007, from <http://commerce.senate.gov/hearings/0518ero.pdf>.
- Fahsholz, Callie. (2005). Movie honors teen's faith. *The Voice*. Retrieved April 7, 2007, from <http://www.multnomah.edu/voice/0302/0302review.html>.
- Family Media Guide*. Retrieved April 6, 2007, from <http://www.familymediaguide.com/index.html>
- Federal Trade Commission. (2000). *Marketing violent entertainment to children – prepared statement*. Retrieved March 30, 2007, from <http://www.ftc.gov/os/2000/09/violencerpttest.htm>.
- McCarthy, Michael. (2006). Illegal, violent teen fight clubs face police crackdown. *USA Today*.
- Price, Sean. (2000). Cleaning up the movies. *New York Times Upfront*, 133, 26-28.
- Sharp, Randy. (2004). Protect young eyes and ears. *USA Today*, November 19, A.10.
- Sova, Dawn B. (2001). *Forbidden films: censorship histories of 125 motion pictures*. New York: Facts on File.