

## “HATCHET II,” Horror and the MPAA

Written by Lianne Spiderbaby  
Friday, 15 October 2010 09:29

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The North American rating system is a reality all films face at some point or another, whether they enjoy a lengthy cinematic exhibition or head straight for the DVD bargain bin. Unrated discs are common and widely available, but they often do not enjoy the same success as a film that has a theatrical release.



Recently, Adam Green’s HATCHET II went before the Motion Picture Association of America and was given the NC-17 rating—one that usually means that the film will be commercially untenable; historically, few NC-17 films have proved profitable. HATCHET II distributor Dark Sky Films felt that the film would be a success regardless, so the decision was made to forgo the rating and hope for the best. The officially unrated HATCHET II opened in 68 theaters on October 1, and horror fans, directors, producers, and supporters of all kinds posted the image seen at right to their Twitter, Facebook, MySpace, and other social media outlets.

HATCHET II was not in theaters for very long; AMC pulled the film practically overnight, without any explanation. Word on the street was that the chain was afraid of being fined for showing an unrated film. Could this really be the case? In today’s world, where practically everything is available on-line (from foreign brides to *faux* snuff films) and youngsters are often admitted into R-rated films (when I attended a showing of PIRANHA 3-D, there were toddlers present, I kid you not), is it really possible that theaters are still threatened by the MPAA? And why is it that HATCHET II was slammed with the dreaded NC-17? Certain bloodier and more sexually explicit movies have been shown the mercy of an R rating.

The MPAA has a long relationship with Hollywood and filmmaking, dating back to 1922. It’s important to understand the nature of this relationship and the history behind it, especially since the group still has such an effect on the film industry today.

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The MPAA started out as the MPPDA (Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America) in 1922, and was originally formed to improve public relations after a series of Hollywood scandals. The film companies owned the MPPDA, and it was meant to save Hollywood from government censorship by imposing limits on acceptable screen behavior. When the Great Depression occurred in the early 1930s, the relaxed morality of society in the Roaring 1920s was partially blamed, and religious and political groups started to demand regulations of the film industry. Thus, in the early '30s, the MPPDA was forced to adopt a Production Code as industry policy, also known as the Hays Code, after Will Hays, head of the MPPDA. From here on out, crime, sex, violence and any other controversial screen subject would come under scrutiny. Filmmakers unwilling to adhere to the Hays Code risked local censorship.



The MPPDA was particularly hard on the depiction of women. Mae West was constantly under their gun; she was extremely successful on Broadway, and the MPPDA would have done anything to keep her from becoming a movie star. At this time, Paramount was facing bankruptcy and believed West was their meal ticket. In 1933, Paramount released her starring vehicle SHE DONE HIM WRONG, and this film, among others, saved the company.

During the release of SHE DONE HIM WRONG, however, the Roosevelt government took power and forced Hays to enforce the Code, and be less lenient. In 1934, studios that wanted to release films without the MPPDA's approval had to pay a hefty \$25,000 fine, and the film would not be shown in first-run theaters. Film theorists David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson argue in the book FILM HISTORY that the Code actually saved Hollywood money by “pressuring filmmakers to avoid shooting scenes that would be later removed.”

In 1945, Eric Johnston replaced Hays, and changed the MPPDA to the MPAA that we know today. In 1966, Jack Valenti, former special assistant to President Lyndon B. Johnson, was named MPAA President. Valenti announced the creation of the MPAA's new Code and Rating Administration (CARA) with its four classifications by audience category: G (general audience), M (mature, which became PG in 1972), R (Restricted, no one under 17 allowed unless with a parent/guardian) and X (persons under 17 not admitted). But even with this new rating system, the power of the Production Code was eroding. Not only was the Code ineffectual, but it also proved to be helpful as a publicity stunt. Audiences were attracted to what they “shouldn't watch.”

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In 1990, the last film to receive an X rating was *LEATHERFACE: THE TEXAS CHAINSAW MASSACRE III*. After this, the NC-17 was introduced as an allegedly more viable adults-only rating for films containing extreme violence, sexual content, etc. Although the X rating was gone, all its stigmas quickly became attached to the NC-17: Many media outlets do not advertise films with the rating, and Blockbuster and other video sellers have sworn to limit the amount of NC-17 material they carry. To this day, if filmmakers want an R rating for their films, they sometimes have to slice and dice in the editing room, much like the serial killers in their films.



The studios have tried pressuring the MPAA into relaxing the NC-17, since it can severely impact box-office revenue. Legally, the ratings system is completely voluntary; filmmakers are allowed to issue their movies unrated, as Green and Dark Sky did with *HATCHET II*, but doing this has its own consequences. Green has been quoted as saying that if *HATCHET II* had been made by a major studio, instead of independently, it might have been given the R rating. I believe this is probably true. We know that the major studios have ties with the MPAA, so if they make a film, it's less likely to be slapped with an NC-17. However, others have said that the miniwave of unrated horror (the *I SPIT ON YOUR GRAVE* remake was released the same way) is a publicity stunt on its own. Nothing gets the juices of a horror fan flowing quite like being rebellious, and flipping authority the bird.

So did the MPAA, now headed up by Joan Graves, get under the skin of the theaters showing Green's film? Or was it just a business decision based on poor attendance? *HATCHET II* has certainly attracted a lot of attention, whatever the case. There are pictures all over the Internet depicting Green with duct tape over his mouth. No doubt this will help when the film hits DVD and Blu-ray and *HATCHET II* finds the success it deserves. However, if you play with fire regarding the MPAA, you're bound to get burned. The institution has existed for years, and it even almost prevented Clark Gable from saying the forever famous "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn" line in *GONE WITH THE WIND* back in 1939.

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Popular opinion is that Hays and other officials created the MPPDA/MPAA in order to enforce censorship upon filmmakers, imposing their puritan opinions on the art of cinema. However, Bordwell argues that the MPPDA simply wanted to avoid censorship from the outside, and handle foreign problems like quotas. Today, the MPAA does not serve as a film critic. The system is not intended to approve, disapprove or censor any film; it merely assigns a rating for guidance, thus leaving the responsibilities in the hands of parents and guardians.

Still, it's not fair that a film's revenue or reception suffers because the MPAA deems it NC-17. It's also not fair that Joan Graves gets to hire all the members of the Classification and Rating Administration, and members' identities are concealed from the general public. There are most likely members in the MPAA who are biased, bigoted and make self-motivated decisions. However, there are also parents out there who really do need help when it comes to deciding what their child should and shouldn't see. I saw ALIEN and HALLOWEEN with my older siblings when I was 8 years old, and I turned out OK. But when I saw THE DEVIL'S REJECTS in 2005, there were children no more than 4 years old accompanied by their parents. During that screening of PIRANHA 3D, a few minutes were ruined by a crying 2-year-old, heard begging his mom to be taken home.

So before we horror fans form an army and charge at the MPAA, it's worthwhile to look at all sides of the story, and its history. It's also important to understand why ratings are imposed on films in the first place—somebody find me that 2-year-old, so we can ask him first. The ratings system that is in place may work against certain movies, as HATCHET II is experiencing; but if we can't be trusted with making good decisions, and the MPAA is only self-serving, then there must be another solution for regulating which films should be seen by which audiences. Think it over.

{jcomments on}