

# Righteousness Express: Riding the PG&R

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A NEW LITMUS TEST of righteousness has swept the church: the shunning of all R rated and the de facto acceptance of all PG and PG-13 movies. I don't like litmus tests. They are too easy, too narrow, and too unreflective even when they purport to measure that quality for which they are being used. This one is particularly disturbing because church members have adopted the rating system as though it were a moral standard. It is not. We sought this life to prove we could learn to make good moral choices. There are no shortcuts to the process, certainly not the substitution of a highly political, expressly non-moral standard of the motion picture industry.

Individual, daily going-about-life moral decisions interest me far more than once-in-a-lifetime moral decisions. Small enough to seem inconsequential by themselves, these daily decisions sometimes do not rate our attention. Even if we take time to consider them, we may make the wrong choice, thinking it will be easy to make up for it later. Making the right choice yields little perceivable gain. Yet I do believe it is our response to daily life that develops our understanding and character, that largely determines our eternal fate. Consequently I believe our entertainment choices matter. Scribbled on a post-it above my desk, Proverbs 4:7 challenges: "Wisdom is the principal thing, therefore, get wisdom and with all thy getting, get understanding." Daily living teaches me I know more and less of wisdom all the time. I do know that humility paves the path to wisdom. Humility tells me I know very little and I have very little time to know more. Yet God tells me I must try. I approach this subject of moral interpretation fully aware of my limitations. I share with you now less a speck of accumulated wisdom than a philosophy of how to go about gaining more.

Humility also teaches, writes Hunter Lewis in his intriguing study of the formulation of values, *A Question of Values*, "too many answers. . .

may become a sort of drug. Like other drugs, it may lead to a cycle of craven dependence alternating with boundless pride, a deadly combination that virtually guarantees misery for believer and unbeliever alike."<sup>1</sup> In my ward, pride in choosing dependence on the easy answer movie rating system is rampant. Were we to allow the Motion Picture Association of America, the National Association of Theater Owners, and the church members who have swallowed the system whole to define our film choices, on whom would we be dependent? What are their values? Does their rating system serve or hinder an effort to live a righteous life? How did we get to the rating system?

Let's start with the last question. The history of the movement for film censorship is full of surprises. In reviewing it, we will see who makes the ratings and the values which guide them.<sup>2</sup> Chicago led the nation, censoring *The Scarlet Letter* in 1914. Only those over 21 received a "pink permit" to enter a theater showing so scandalous a subject. Chicago stood almost alone until 1922 when two movie star scandals coupled with industry economic problems fueled moralists and reformists who claimed salacious films and shoddy movie-star behavior had caused a drop in attendance. Actually, competition from radio beginning late in 1921, fewer films and theaters after a brief post-war recession, and the increased use of the automobile for entertainment probably cut hardest into movie profits. The industry hired President Harding's Postmaster General and former chairman of the Republican National Committee, Will Hays, to handle film public relations and stave off legislative censorship.

Because few films survive from the 20's, the great silent film decade, we know little of their content. Several great films do endure: Buster Keaton's *The General* and Sergei Eisenstein's *The Battleship Potemkin*, for example. Whatever the general content of silent films, we know critics concerned about the moral impact of film picked up steam by the end of the decade. Between 1928 and 1932 William H. Short published hundreds of pages of unscientifically conceived and conducted studies to prove the negative impact of movies on youth. He even hooked teenagers up to electrodes to measure their responses to films. Many other researchers joined him. It is important to note critics feared not only sex and violence, but also any threat to the established social order. Mack Sennett's Keystone films depicted all manner of social chaos. The early Marx Brothers' films, notably *Duck Soup* which challenged the legitimacy of government

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1. Hunter Lewis, *A Question of Values* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1990), 60.

2. Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994). Throughout this essay, I have relied heavily on Sklar's definitive cultural history of American movies for history of the ratings movement.

and *Horse Feathers* which attacked higher education, a domain largely upper-class at the time, questioned a social order already suspect as the depression lingered. The Catholic church picked up the banner and in 1933 organized the Legion of Decency to boycott films the church considered indecent. In just ten weeks 11 million people, including many Protestants and Jews, signed boycott petitions. Simultaneously, the depression emptied the theaters; attendance hit a five-year low. The industry would again fight back with self-censorship.

Just as a decade earlier, the industry pre-empted the censorship movement, this time by hiring Irish Catholic politician Joseph I. Breen as Hays's Production Code Administration boss. Breen had the power to censor or reject outright any US film, and he had the confidence of the Catholic Church. For two decades Breen maintained stringent control over the movies. From 1936 into the 50s, films extolled the social order: class, race, and sexual distinctions. Hollywood tamed even the harmless nihilism of the Marx Brothers. The characters in screwball comedies tended to be rich and powerful, proving just how delightful and harmless the powerful could be. Breen ordered the udders on Disney's cartoon cows removed as too titillating. It was a white male, G-rated world. What would change so satisfying a status quo? The answer is the same force that moved the movies to add sex, violence, and a questioning of the social order in the 20s,: a dwindling box-office. Just as radio threatened movie economics in the early 20s, television threatened them in the 50s. The industry jealously watched less censored European films, works of Bergman, Fellini and Renoir, among others, create a small art-house market. They knew, of course, that the sex, violence, and subversion of those films could be translated into a mass market again. Weaker, the church posed less threat. Society began openly to question racial and sexual politics. The scene was ripe for change. Change came as Breen retired and his successor, Geoffrey Shurlock, adopted his own standard of allowing real human behavior he did not believe audiences would find gross or offensive. Talk about a vague standard.

Still the box office disappointed. When Jack Valenti, like Hays a politician, succeeded Hays in 1966, he preempted the 44 local censor boards, irritating Hollywood by devising the voluntary rating system. The system copied a British rating scheme, but with fewer categories and more vagueness. From its inception, the rating definitions have constantly changed with social change and the make-up of the board. Actually several groups provide input to rating. The main group is the board made up of the Motion Picture Association of America and the National Association of Theater Owners representatives. They consider the opinions of a committee of Los Angeles parents. Another board of fourteen to eighteen industry people can consider appeals. Rulings are by simple majority vote. The boards are political responses to the threat of censor-

ship and the industry's desire to entice the public into the theaters. Politics affects the voluntary enforcement of the ratings too. When, in the aftermath of Columbine, the president of the NATO announced a crack-down on under-aged entry into R movies, the New York Times reported he admitted he was trying to stave off legislation.<sup>3</sup>

A pattern is clear: the industry's objectives in self-censorship have always been to sell tickets and to discourage legislation and litigation. Presuming we are not concerned about the profits of the industry, why would we support a rating system? First, we may wish to protect the weak who have no other means of protection. Over 1000 studies point to a causal connection between media and violent, aggressive behaviors in some children. Researchers continue to see a relationship between promiscuity and insecurity and the media in young people. Profanity is everywhere. All parents do not protect children from violence or sexual immorality, so shouldn't society intervene? Here is the best better-than-nothing argument for the ratings; however, the system is severely flawed. I believe most teenagers figure it out quickly. I suspect we undermine the possibility of youth respecting us and our rules if the rules aren't based on sound principle, much as the public disregards arbitrarily low speed limits and disrespects the lawmakers who set them.

Let's consider the flaws. The MPAA board says there are no automatic rules regarding violence or nudity.<sup>4</sup> We can see that in the unpredictability of the ratings. The ratings board is lenient with violence. Touching a woman's breast rates an R; cutting off an arm with a chainsaw rates a PG-13. The Board makes no attempt to differentiate a Biblical moral war from an evil slaughter or gratuitous violence from historical violence. *Glory's* study of a black unit in the Civil War is rated with a slasher movie. R violence is, according to the Board, "too rough or persistent."<sup>5</sup> What is rough? What is persistent? A sexually-derived expletive gets a PG-13 if used once in a non-sexual context but an R in a sexual context or if used twice. Sex is equally arbitrary. A trailer for *Six Degrees of Separation* was banned for including a nude shot of Adam depicted by Michelangelo on the Sistine Chapel.

Appeals can wear down the Board, which must see each film again in its entirety even if only 5 seconds has been excised. Roger Ebert has joked he would give *Wild Orchid* a G to avoid seeing it 20 times. My favorite *Beat the Appeals* story actually goes back to Hays and Breen. Mae West purposefully filmed lots of scandalous "throw-away" scenes she

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3. David E. Rosenbaum, "Theaters Will Ask to See ID's for R-Rated Films," *The New York Times*, June 9, 1999, 1.

4. <http://www.mpa.org/movieratings/about/content.htm>.

5. <http://www.mpa.org/movieratings/about/content5.htm>.

knew would never pass the Code. The Board was so overwhelmed excising those, it left in many otherwise objectionable items. *A Clockwork Orange* dropped its rating from X to R by excising 30 seconds of sex. Kubrick made no changes to the ultraviolence of the film. Clint Eastwood personally smiled at the Board and they changed an R rating for *A Perfect World* to PG-13 with no changes to the film. I can't tell you whether they were right; I was so appalled by the reviews which described a film which celebrated kidnapping, exposing a child to sex and robbery, and ridiculing his family's religious values that I made no attempt to see it. Films can be re-released years later with no changes but a lower rating, for example *Midnight Cowboy* from an X, now NC-17, to an R. The economic pressures on the industry have never been greater. No longer does Hollywood produce many movies. The big studios now risk so much money on so few films they can ill afford any box office flops. The right rating can mean the difference between profit and loss.

The great and inevitable flaw in the system screams at us: The ratings board does not consider morality, theirs or ours. The ratings say nothing of the moral perspectives of films. A more moral world could never be the ratings' aim. Moral unanimity is impossible in a pluralistic society. Whose morality should dictate? We could spend hours discussing the harm done to social justice by Breen's concept of truth, and only he has had anything approaching the power to enforce his view of morality on an entire art industry. Furthermore, the more basic question of whether art can be created where maximum profit is the primary goal has never been answered. How much less likely is the creation of an art exhibiting nothing but capital-T Truth where maximum profit is the primary goal?

The Board publishes a telling disclaimer to its rating conclusions. It reads: "In any appraisal, what is 'too much?' becomes very controversial. How much is 'too much' violence? Are classic war films too violent with scenes of marines storming a beach and slaying hundreds, wounding thousands? Is it the graphic cop killing, the gangster shoot-out, or the slap across the face of a woman that determines 'too much'? How much is 'blood spilled' to be given emphasis? Where is the line to be drawn between 'this is all right' and 'this is not all right'? The same vexing doubts occur in sex scenes or those where language rises on the Richter scale, or where behavior not considered normal is revealed on the screen. What follows is disagreement, inevitable, inexorable, and often times to endure and confront. We understand that."<sup>6</sup>

Church members who adopt the rating system and suspend all further thought do not understand that. It seems to me the rating system is

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6. <http://www.mpa.org/movieratings/about/content5.htm>.

so flawed it serves only as a vague warning to look further at the film. Better-than-nothing may be an aid, but it is not an acceptable moral standard. Can we devise a personal selection system based on moral values? Of course we can. How do we determine our values anyway? I agree with Lewis's conclusion that we obtain our values from six sources: Authority (Scriptures, Revelation), Logic, Sense Experience (what we see and hear), Emotion (what we feel), Intuition (subconscious thinking), and Science. Some Mormons fool themselves into believing they need and use only authority. This denial of human nature and free agency would fill many other papers. I mention value development only to underline my belief in the importance of considering authority (leaders who advise me not to see R rated films), weighing any input logically, studying scientific conclusions of the effect of viewing, and respecting the impact of what I see, hear, and feel in the development of my values. An important point of art is to broaden our sensory experience in the pursuit of truth.

Movies draw close scrutiny for good reason. They do appeal to our emotions, our senses, and our logic. They do reach a mass audience. Unlike a book whose slower pace and printed page invites us to create our own pictures, a movie moves so quickly and visually that it precludes much viewer creation. The picture supplants the thousand words we would create in our minds. Tolstoy lived to be jealous of the screenwriter. He lamented that, writing, he couldn't pass quickly enough from one scene to another. He knew film montage would eliminate that problem. I know a movie can quickly and powerfully alter my perceptions. I celebrate and appreciate the strength of this art form. As much as any sensory experience, it is to be respected and chosen carefully.

Some argue from our pulpits that the power of film is so dangerous we should never see a film with profanity, nudity, or violence. The same critics do not call for a boycott of Michaelangelo or Shakespeare. But if *Hamlet* is worth reading, it is worth viewing. Furthermore, the Bible is not just a collection of principles. It is a colorful presentation of man's baser and finer history; we need to know both. As much as any book, the Bible illustrates the power of story over bare principle. We must judge the morality of the message. If the message is good, a more effective presentation will not make it bad.

I choose films that I believe will bring me joy (not necessarily pleasure) and which will expand my understanding of the human condition and its promise. I approach film with an Old Testament freedom of inquiry, secure enough of my little place in God's world that I can make decisions regarding art, secure enough in my faith that I can accommodate new discoveries, even celebrate them. Sometimes I ask only entertainment—no serious message, or perhaps not a message I feel I need to reinforce, but escape. A marshmallow. Marshmallows would be boring

and harmful as a diet, though. So most often I am looking for films which expand my ability to understand myself and others, to listen to people unlike me, to get inside their skins. If, as in *My Left Foot*, they are lower class Irishmen, I do not ask them not to swear or brawl if they will show me how ordinary people can live with cerebral palsy until they prove the highest values of love, perseverance, integrity, and self-sacrifice. Few films depict the power of a mother's love better than *My Left Foot*.

Need a reminder of the beauty of God's earth? Rent any number of John Ford's or Akira Kurosawa's films. Both directors revered and captured that beauty. Two of their films are on so many ten best films of all time lists, not because they excite us with sex and violence, though that, as in the Bible, is ungratuitously, informatively there, but because they invite us to get inside the skins of human beings wrestling with the most taxing of issues. Ford's *The Searchers* immerses us in racism and family commitment; Kurosawa, like Ford a storyteller at heart, confronts egoism in his greatest film, *Rashomon*. He tells us we have a sinful need for flattering falsehood to make us feel we are better than we are.

We can look for films which expose us to a wide variety of human behavior over time and across cultures so that we will know enough of human capacities for evil to be realistic and of human capacities for good to be hopeful. Good film explores without exploiting our behaviors. Vittorio de Sica's *Garden of the Finzi-Continis* lays bear the danger of ignoring the capacity for evil as the Italian Jews depicted deny the danger of Fascism. The brief moment of upper body frontal nudity which garnered an R is included as an immoral and an intended-to-be moral act. The young woman engages in an affair as an expression of "What does it matter considering what's going on?"—a posture of despair and therefore of evil. She exposes the affair to the man she loves and who loves her to drive him away and save him the pain of seeing a loved one suffer. She anticipates the suffering ahead. It is an understandable but immoral self-sacrifice. It is not titillating; it is tragic and instructive.

An *Ensign* article in August 1989 stated that anything that is offensive to chastity or modesty is pornographic.<sup>7</sup> With some clarification, I could probably agree with the basic premise. But I could not agree every consideration of immorality or example of immodesty is offensive to either. De Sica's heroine's, Micol's, brief exposure stuns us to see not only the immorality of anti-Semitism, but the weakness in some of its victims, a weakness that made it easier for evil to gain sway. Both *The Searchers* and *Rashomon* deal with abduction, rape, and the blaming of the victim. Because I have close associations with several rape victims, rape is my least favorite screen subject. Ford and Kurosawa appropriately do not

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7. R. Gary Shapiro, "Leave the Obscene Unseen," *Ensign* (August 1989): 27.

film the rapes; Hollywood could learn something here. Nevertheless, the subject is offensive to chastity, but the treatments are not. The films are not pornographic. Both move us to compassion for the victim; both are good moral examples. Anything which brings me to a greater understanding of the wisdom and necessity of God's laws, the complexity of choice, or compassion for my brothers and sisters and myself in trying to live righteous lives, or inspires me to the possibility of the courage to live such a life cannot be pornographic. That which exploits, degrades, cheapens, depicts depravity for depravity's sake, and exhibits no thoughtful consideration or impetus toward God's truths is pornographic. We know it when we see it, just as the justices wrote. All that is not pornographic does not rest in a box of well-clothed, sweet-spoken and gentle, perfect people.

I don't want to see pornography. Furthermore, I know myself well-enough to know I also don't want to see the thoroughly mindless, cruel humor, gore, banality, vapidness, endorsements of adultery, the human body exhibited for titillation, the only weak and cartoonish adults of a teen movie, unquestioning worship of materialism, celebrations of stupidity or the unexamined life, acceptance of promiscuity, and any number of other film treatments which would do nothing to strengthen me. That list alone eliminates as much that is rated PG and PG-13 as R. I also don't want to be frightened à la the horror genre. We must know ourselves. Some films are ok for some and bad for others. Some love a roller-coaster ride. Some enjoy Edgar Allen Poe. I don't. If the rating system is of little use to us in avoiding what we want to avoid, how can we?

I read multiple reviews before seeing any movie. The *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *The New Yorker*, and two local papers are constants. The Catholic site is especially interesting because their rating system adds more categories and discusses the moral messages of films. Check out their reviews and ratings at <http://domestic-church.com> and [www.nc-cbuscc.org/movies/index.htm](http://www.nc-cbuscc.org/movies/index.htm). Compare the Catholic and Motion Picture Association ratings on three popular films. *Austin Powers* gets a PG-13 but an A-III, adults only, from the Catholics. They describe the movie as silly shenanigans alternating with gross toilet humor and lame sexual innuendo for a mixed bag of goofy, truly tasteless entertainment. Powers is travelling back to the 60s to recover his libido. *American Pie*, an R, rates a Catholic O for offensive. They see a scornful treatment of premarital virginity and sex as mere sport, sexual situations involving masturbation and oral encounters, some nudity, gross toilet humor, occasional profanity and recurring rough language. Sounds like a real moral peach. The Catholics take *Daredevil* from PG-13 up 2 notches to IV—adults with reservations—for the film's brutal violence, an "unnecessary trip to the bedroom," and a sympathetic treatment of vigilante justice. The last two are moral concerns with which the motion picture rating system is unconcerned.



Ebert's shows and books are also useful, as is the Halliwell guide. *The New York Times* periodically republishes large collections of its reviews. TV, radio, and the internet help. We are not at the mercy of the rating system. Get to know your reviewers. They, like writers, directors, and actors, present you with their biases. Learn to detect them. Peter Travers in the *Rolling Stone* is a most knowledgeable critic, and I find his insights useful, but I know he is comfortable with sex and violence I consider gratuitous and to be avoided, so I watch his language carefully.

I want to respect my religious community. I do not respect social pressure based on rules that don't embrace the community's highest principles. I do not respect an urging to park my dignity and free agency at the feet of the Motion Picture Association of America or the National Association of Theatre Owners. I do not respect any suggestion that we are unable to make responsible entertainment choices without a rule that is an unprincipled and, unlike a principle, constantly changing crutch. I do not respect the suggestion that my understanding of and faith in the Gospel could be undermined by depictions such as those in *Schindler's List* of Nazi attempts to dehumanize the Jews with immodesty and murder. I am puzzled by the thought that any single image in that film could be more powerful than the lasting awe I feel for an ordinary, flawed human being who rose to such love and courage. Let's use the rating system as a beginning in the important decisions of what films we and our families will see. Let's teach our children every message has a messenger and every messenger has a bias. Teach them to discern the bias. Is it moral? Is immorality depicted in such a way it moves us to see the wisdom of morality? Does it increase our compassion for others? PG can mean pretty ghastly and R can mean righteous. Let's work hard to understand the Gospel and develop the wisdom and inspiration to choose worthwhile entertainment.