

Are the movie ratings a reliable way to select movies?

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Only an X rating is reliable. It means DON'T GO! The other ratings are not reliable, partly because the guidelines for rating films are so vague.

For example, a "G" rating is described as "General Audiences, all ages admitted." These are films supposedly containing nothing in theme, language, violence, or sexual matters offensive to parents of young children. But the definition of "offensive" is arbitrarily determined by the board. For example, colloquial expressions using vain references to Deity do not necessarily exclude a film from the G rating.

A "PG" rating is described as "Parental Guidance suggested; some material may not be suitable for children." According to official Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) statements, PG films may contain profanity, providing that "harsh, sexually-derived words" are avoided; there may be violence if it is not "cumulative"; and "indications of sensuality and brief nudity" will not disqualify a film from the PG rating.

An "R" rating is described as "Restricted; persons under age seventeen must be accompanied by a parent or guardian." With a few exceptions, R-rated films have proved to be unacceptable to the tastes and moral conscience of most Latter-day Saints. These films generally manifest little or no restraint by those who have made them—and to whose ideas and moral values we willfully subject our hearts, our minds, and our spirits for two hours in the dark.

Films are rated by a seven-member board within the MPAA. The qualifications for selecting these judges are: Do they enjoy movies? Do they possess an "intelligent maturity" of judgment? Do they have the capacity to put themselves in the role of most parents and view the film as most parents would?

The system's flaws are readily apparent. Even a perfectly qualified member of the rating board is hardly in a position to define appropriate standards or suggest moral guidelines for everyone. This is particularly true for Latter-day Saints. Since the judges are ignorant of LDS values, they cannot be responsive to the goals and objectives of Latter-day Saint families. Even if it were possible for these judges to "put themselves in the role of most [LDS] parents and view the film as most [LDS] parents would," the moral credibility of the ratings system is seriously challenged by the questions left *unanswered*: Is there a reverence for God, or if not, for a belief in God? Is there an

understanding of the purposes of life? Are marriage and fidelity understood? Are home and family and the needs of children honored?

Whoever the judges may be, they are the single source of motion picture ratings. The criteria employed by the board are (1) theme, (2) language, (3) violence, and (4) sex and nudity. The final judgment is by majority vote. One person's preference, therefore, can make a difference between a G and PG, or between a PG and an R. Consequently, reliability in the ratings totally disappears with the narrow margin and capricious choice between a "hard G" and a "soft R," as these borderline films are described.

Over the past several years, standards applied to the rating system have eroded along with the contemporary standards of our society, thus making the rating system even less trustworthy. (There have been celebrated cases of films rated X which were later re-released as PG.) What we want to avoid in movies—as in everything else—is the vulgar, the obscene, and the violent; R and X ratings used to be a convenient way of identifying these elements. But today we must take unusual pains to scrutinize movies with PG ratings, as well. Furthermore, parents may have traditionally been willing to turn their judgment over to the MPAA board in the case of G-rated movies; but perhaps here, too, they should be using more parental discretion. Many of the G-rated movies are wonderful and uplifting; others are empty and ridiculous. Some movies that receive G ratings do so almost automatically because they do not contain objectionable language, sex, or violence; yet some of them present very questionable models for children to be exposed to—silly adults, bumbling police officers, know-it-all kids, and so on.

How then, does one select appropriate film entertainment? A more efficient rating system would help, but it would still fail for the reasons we have previously discussed. Ultimately, there is no rating system that will satisfy every person's individual standards. It remains for each of us to sort through word-of-mouth reports, media reviews, publicity, and then compare what we find with our own conscience. The only reliable standards are the ones we set for ourselves, guided by our quest for perfection and inspired by the principles of the gospel.