

*It comes up in virtually every ward in the United States: “The prophet has said we shouldn’t see R-rated films . . . period!” What’s the real story? How might we decide for ourselves?*

## CAN “GOOD MORMONS” WATCH R-RATED MOVIES?

*By John Hatch*

ON A RECENT SUNDAY, OUR GOSPEL DOCTRINE lesson turned, as many do, to the importance of obedience. Sighing, I decided to watch the clock. But when the discussion turned to rationalizing disobedience, I was very pleasantly surprised by the many insightful comments. Instead of condemning commandment breakers as sinners without strong testimonies, several class members spoke genuinely of the need for love, acceptance, and understanding.

Apparently, the instructor was looking for a more black and white example of rationalizing a commandment, so she brought up her own favorite: “Some people rationalize seeing R-rated movies.” My stomach felt a twinge. I knew exactly where she was heading—would I have the courage to speak up? “They rationalize seeing bad movies such as *Schindler’s List* or *Saving Private Ryan* because they claim they have a good message. But we know the prophet has said not to see R-rated films . . . period! So, there’s no way to justify doing it.” My arm twitched as I fought the urge to raise my hand. This time, I remained silent.

During a priesthood lesson a few weeks later, my “don’t rock the boat” inner voice lost the war of wills. The lesson was on protecting our homes from evil influences, and quorum members quickly zeroed in on the media. They listed ways evil can enter our homes: books, magazines, the Internet, music, movies, television, and radio. The only non-media item suggested was “friends and acquaintances.” Almost immediately, the discussion turned to R-rated movies, and our quorum president put it forth as fact that every prophet has taught, point blank: “Don’t see R-rated movies.”

I couldn’t stop myself. “Actually, very few Church leaders have singled out R-rated movies. Most simply suggest avoiding ‘inappropriate’ movies.”

This did not go over well with him. He insisted, for instance, that both the old and the new *For the Strength of Youth* pamphlets include the admonition to not see R-rated movies.<sup>1</sup>



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I tried to be humble in reply: “Um, I recently read both versions. They urge the youth to avoid inappropriate movies, but they never single out ones with R ratings.” (I have to confess I was secretly happy to think that he probably rushed home to look it up, only to learn he had been mistaken.)

Doubtless, nearly every Sunday School, Relief Society, Young Men and Young Women, and priesthood quorum class in the United States has, at one time or another, heard a member state categorically, “The prophet has said Latter-day Saints should not see R-rated movies.” Someone will very likely have told how they’ve sat fingers crossed in theaters watching previews, hoping the movies that look good won’t have that forbidden rating. In many a fast and testimony meeting, teens have proudly recounted how they have left parties when someone dared to put in an R-rated video.

Just this past December, Brigham Young University even issued new guidelines that urge professors to use only “appropriate” materials in their classroom instruction. According to the statement, faculty members should not “require students to view unedited R-rated movies, as a matter not simply of content but of obedience to prophetic counsel.” The statement continues, “It is important to help students not only to understand the world, but to stand firm against its evils—prepared to respond to its challenges with love, testimony, wisdom, eloquence and inspired artistry of their own.”<sup>2</sup>

The “no R-rated movies” maxim has become so prevalent in Mormon culture that it naturally invites questions about the rating system and how it works. Also: What exactly *have* Church presidents or other General Authorities said about R-rated movies? What is the relationship between the rating system and the Church, and how should Latter-day Saints determine what to watch?

THE BIRTH OF THE RATING SYSTEM  
*Don’t use “hell” or “damn;” don’t get a “C”!*

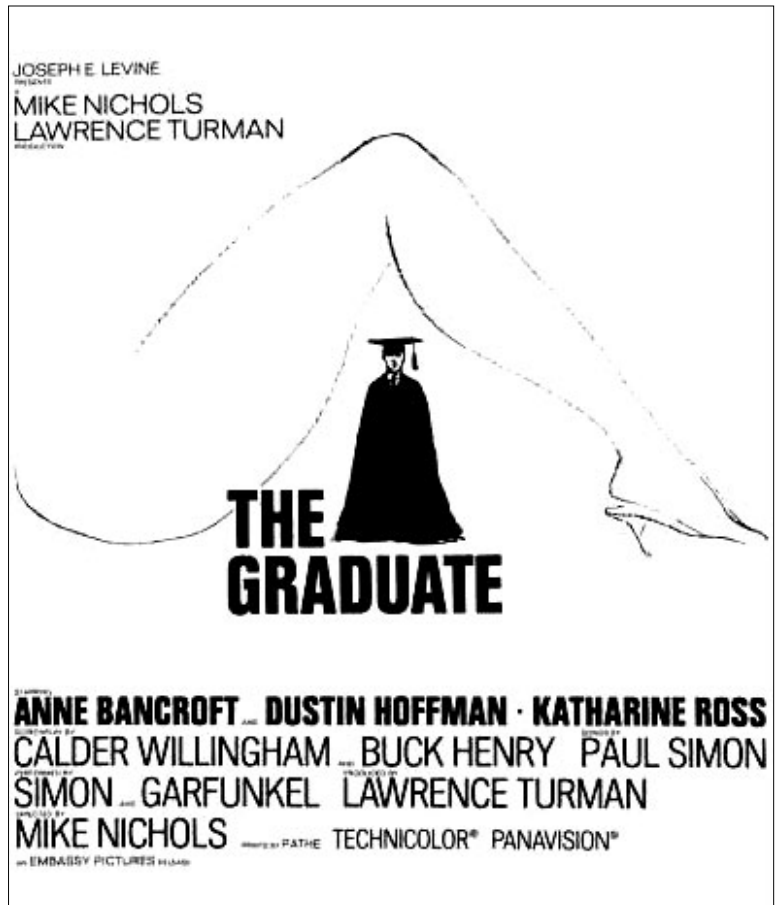
ALMOST FROM THE beginning of the motion picture era, moralists have complained that films contain too much sex and violence.<sup>3</sup> And, for almost as long, various censor groups have threatened Hollywood with regula-

tion. In each instance, the film industry has managed to quell such threats by establishing voluntary standards. In 1922, Hollywood created the Motion Picture Association of America (hereafter, MPAA), and it, in turn, created a production code to regulate offensive material in films. The code was implemented in 1923 under the stern watch of Will Hays, former postmaster general of the United States. The system, known as the Hays Production Code, employed a list that consisted mostly of “don’ts” and “be carefals.” The “don’ts” included the use of profanity such as “hell” and “damn,”<sup>4</sup> nudity, illegal drug use, any depiction of homosexuality, and “ridicule of the clergy.” The code’s “be carefals” warned against such things as “sympathy for criminals,” men and women in bed together (thus the familiar scenes of husbands and wives sleeping in separate beds), surgery, and excessive kissing.

Early on, the Hays code was applied quite leniently; studios could get away with what they wanted (and that was incredibly tame by today’s standards). However, before long, the Catholic Church’s Legion of Decency began applying its own ratings to films. Studios soon learned that a designation of “C” (for “Condemned”) could destroy a film’s box office gross. In response, the industry began to apply the Hays Code more stringently, and the Legion of Decency eventually backed off. Following World War II, a more mature citizenry had less desire to be “protected” by moral watchdog groups. And, although the Hays code remained intact with only minor changes, studios became much more daring in applying (or circumventing) it.

The current film rating system came about during the late 1960s counterculture years. Dubbed the “second golden age of Hollywood,” the years 1968 to 1980 saw films such as *Easy Rider*, *Bonnie and Clyde*, *The Graduate*, *The Godfather*, *The Deer Hunter*, *Taxi Driver*, and *Raging Bull*. These movies, and many others, were made by newcomers and baby boomers who had little desire to follow an outmoded standards code. As a result of their daring, religious groups and moralists once again cried, “Too much sex; too much violence!” Fearing outside regulation, the MPAA once more took notice, and a clash with studios began—this time leading to a new ratings system.

Two movies in particular led to the demise of the Hays Production Code and the birth of the current system. The first, *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, used language previously unheard in a popular U.S. film.<sup>5</sup> The second, *Blow Up*, was the first major studio release to contain frontal nudity.<sup>6</sup> Today the MPAA portrays itself as the concerned organization that, following such films, took action to inform parents about the content of films their children might see. In reality, the association is what it has always been: a group of Hollywood filmmaker responding to the threat of working under the shadow of external censors. Likely no rating system would ever have existed in Hollywood had it not been for the repeated threat of outside intervention.<sup>7</sup>

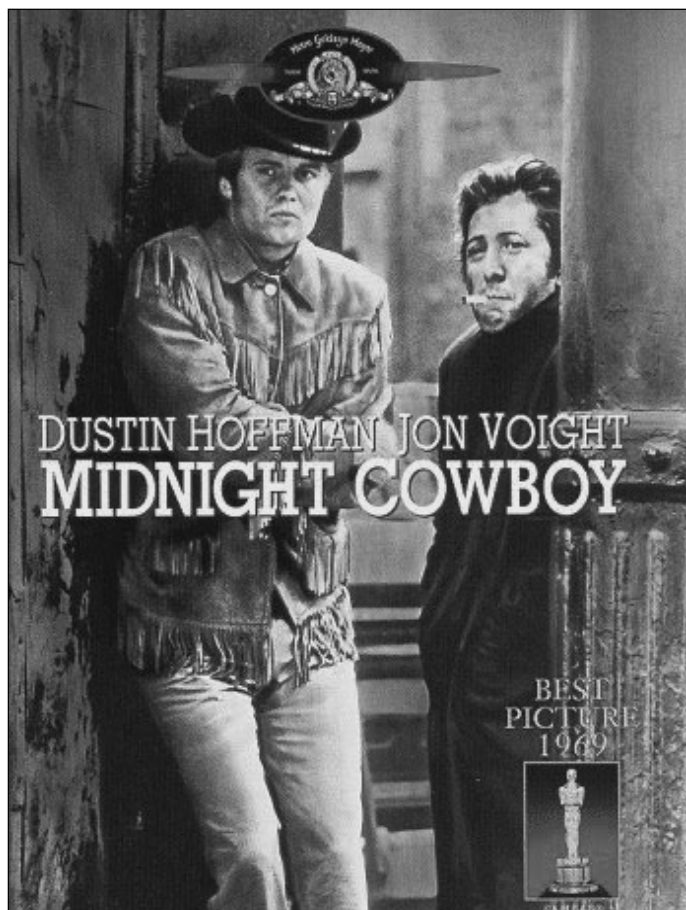


*Movies such as The Graduate, The Deer Hunter, Poltergeist, and Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom forced Hollywood to rethink the rating system.*

*A shift towards parental responsibility*

LAUNCHED 1 NOVEMBER 1968, the new rating system focused primarily on helping guide parents about films their children might see.<sup>8</sup> Originally, the system used the following symbols: G (“General Audience”), M (“Mature”), R (“Restricted”), and X (“Adults Only”). Within a few months, the MPAA realized that many moviegoers assumed M was worse than an R rating, so they changed the M to GP (“General Audiences, Parental Guidance Suggested”). Within a year, this symbol changed again, now standardized as PG (“Parental Guidance Suggested”).

Another change occurred on 1 July 1984 when the MPAA introduced the PG-13 rating. This change resulted mainly from discussions first generated by the 1982 film *Poltergeist*. When submitted to the MPAA review board, the film initially received an R. The film’s producers appealed and won, and, despite several intense scenes, the rating was reduced to PG. Some parents and critics complained the film was not appropriate for children and should not have been rated PG. However, most also agreed the film was not “adult” enough to garner an R rating. Two years later, the second installment in the Indiana Jones trilogy, *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*,



*Midnight Cowboy*, originally rated X, is now officially rated R by the MPAA. Changing social standards have affected which content elements warrant higher ratings.

received a PG rating. However, the film's creators, George Lucas and Steven Spielberg, felt their film was too intense for younger viewers and should be given more than a PG rating; yet they also felt it didn't warrant an R. To resolve the dilemma, they proposed a PG-13 rating ("Parents Strongly Cautioned—Some Material May Be Inappropriate for Children Under 13"), meant to suggest something not worthy of an R but deserving of parents taking a closer look before letting their pre- and early-teen children view it. The MPAA agreed, and the new designation was born.

The last change to the rating system came in 1990 to the "Adults Only" X rating. Initially, the MPAA saw no harm in allowing filmmakers to self-apply this rating to their movies. Therefore, it had trademarked all the rating symbols except X. However, it didn't take long for the adult film industry, without the MPAA's permission, to begin using the X rating, even going so far as to invent ratings like XXX and XXXX.

To most people, an X rating quickly came to symbolize movies such as *Deep Throat* or *Debbie Does Dallas*, not *Midnight Cowboy* or *Scarface*. As a result of this perception, many video stores refused to carry any X-rated film, even if it wasn't pornographic, and many newspapers and other media soon refused to run ads for any X-rated films. Troubled, Hollywood

called for the death of the X rating and demanded a new symbol that could indicate "Adults Only" without implying "porn." The issue soon came to a head.

The first dispute resulted in a lawsuit between Miramax Studio and the MPAA over the X rating given to Pedro Almodóvar's film, *Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!* Although the MPAA prevailed, the New York Supreme Court suggested in its 1990 ruling that with regard to its ratings system, the MPAA "strongly consider some changes in its methods of operations."<sup>9</sup> A few years later, after the MPAA assigned an X rating to Universal Pictures' *Henry and June*, the studio demanded the MPAA create a new rating category, warning that if the board didn't, the studio would market the film without the MPAA's assigned rating or approval. Threatened with the appearance of disunity, and starkly reminded that cooperation with the rating system is voluntary, the MPAA revised the system once again. On 27 September 1990, a new, trademarked rating for "Adults Only" debuted—the NC-17 rating ("No One 17 and Under Admitted"). Although the MPAA has worked hard to dispel the myth that a NC-17 symbol means a film is pornographic, most filmgoers have yet to get the message. So studios often refuse to release films rated NC-17, opting instead to re-edit the film to meet R-rating standards.<sup>10</sup>

#### PROPHETIC COUNSEL

*"Suppressing the arbuttle" and dating advice*

What exactly have Church leaders said about the rating system in general, and R ratings in particular? A summary first: Direct statements about movie ratings are few and far between. No official Church statements exist on the rating system nor on R-rated films. No *Church Handbook of Instructions* entries specifically mention R-rated movies. And I can find no evidence of counsel given to local leaders that encourages them to speak out against R-rated films.

Prior to the advent of the MPAA's current system, only one statement appears from a Church leader about movie regulations. It is found in a 1921 telegram from President Heber J. Grant to Utah senator and apostle Reed Smoot, in which the prophet referred to the then-new Hays Production Code: "The first presidency appreciate highly what Mr. Hays has done in suppressing the arbuttle<sup>11</sup> and other improper films."<sup>12</sup> Church leaders of this era also made a handful of other statements condemning sex and violence in movies, but none referred specifically to the Hays code.<sup>13</sup>

After a thorough search of *Conference Reports*, the *LDS Church News*, books by Church presidents, apostles, and selected members of the Quorum of the Seventy (both in- and out-of-print titles), and Church publications such as the *Ensign* and the *New Era*, I have found only two talks by a sitting Church president that warn specifically against R-rated movies.<sup>14</sup> In a 5 April 1986 General Conference Priesthood meeting in which he noted he was specifically addressing the Aaronic Priesthood youth, President Ezra Taft Benson said:

## CHURCH LEADER STATEMENTS ON R-RATED FILMS

ELDER ROBERT L. SIMPSON: "It goes without saying that all X- and R-rated movies are automatically eliminated."<sup>15</sup>

ELDER HARTMAN RECTOR JR.: "Do not attend R- or X-rated movies, and avoid drive-ins."<sup>16</sup>

ELDER GENE R. COOK (*as part of a litany of problems facing the Church, including "adults who want to sit on the back row of the chapel; people who don't want to sing in church; and Aaronic Priesthood young men who don't wear white shirts and ties while officiating during the sacrament*): "... lack of Sunday observance; casual dress and TV sports on Sunday; some who watch soap operas daily and PG-13 or R-rated movies; parents with loose rules; teens whose parents have bought them their own car; ... families not doing things together but largely letting their children go with friends where they are exposed to inappropriate music, swearing, bad language, vulgar jokes; and so on."<sup>17</sup>

ELDER H. BURKE PETERSON: "I know it is hard counsel we give when we say that movies that are R-rated and many with PG-13 ratings are produced by satanic influences. Our standards should not be dictated by the rating system."<sup>18</sup>

ELDER JOSEPH B. WIRTHLIN: "So-called little transgressions are especially serious in our effort to live a life of moral purity. Satan would have us believe that the minor infractions do not need to concern us. Why worry if we do not control our thoughts or if we allow pornographic or immoral entertainment to be part of our lives? Does attending just a few R-rated movies really damage us? Are we so unworthy when we watch just two or three questionable programs on the cable television channels? Are the lewd novels of the day really so bad? These little rationalizations prompted by Satan will become great detriments to our spiritual growth. . . ."<sup>19</sup>

ELDER JOE J. CHRISTENSEN: "In addition to resolving that we will read only the best in print, it would be very beneficial to our spirits if we resolved not to watch even one R-rated or X-rated (NC-17) movie, video, or television show from now on. That may appear to some to be an extreme position, but I assure you that much of our future happiness and success depends on it."<sup>20</sup>

ELDER CREE-L KOFFORD: "All too often, we get ourselves enmeshed in the process of trying to understand why God gave us a particular commandment. We want to rationalize. I don't know where that is more evident than in watching movies. Young people know they should not watch R- or X-rated movies, and yet time after time I hear them say, 'Well it's only rated R because it's violent.' What difference does it make why it is rated R? The fact is, a prophet of God has said not to go to R-rated movies (Ezra Taft Benson, "To the Youth of the Noble Birthright," *Ensign* [May 1986]: 45). That ought to be good enough."<sup>21</sup>

The *LDS Church News* has on a few occasions also mentioned R-rated movies while referencing the above statements or quoting letters from readers who say they won't watch any films with an R rating.

Consider carefully the words of the prophet Alma to his errant son, Corianton, "Forsake your sins, and go no more after the lusts of your eyes." "The lusts of your eyes." In our day, what does that expression mean? Movies, television programs, and video recordings that are both suggestive and lewd. Magazines and books that are obscene and pornographic. We counsel you, young men, not to pollute your minds with such degrading matter, for the mind through which this filth passes is never the same afterward. Don't see R-rated movies or vulgar videos or participate in any entertainment that is immoral, suggestive, or pornographic.

Several months later, President Benson addressed the young women, repeating the text of his earlier speech nearly verbatim: "Don't see R-rated movies or vulgar videos or participate in any entertainment that is immoral, suggestive, or pornographic. And don't accept dates from young men who would take you to such entertainment."<sup>22</sup>

Besides these statements from a sitting Church president, there are perhaps surprisingly few direct statements against R-rated movies [see sidebar, above], and very often they reference one or both of these speeches by President Benson. We can only speculate why most Church leaders have

avoided specifically singling out movies with a certain rating. One possibility would be a reluctance of leaders to endorse a system the Church has no influence over. The movie industry controls the rating system. Hence, the fact that many Church members hold such a hard and fast attitude about R-ratings is quite ironic: the very system they assume Church leaders have told them to trust is controlled and operated by the people who produce the movies they complain about.

Although some Church leaders have singled out R-rated movies, at least one apostle has said the rating system is superfluous. Elder L. Tom Perry has commented, "We do not need man-made rating systems to determine what we should read, what we should watch, what we should listen to, or how we should conduct our lives. What we do need to do is live worthy of the continued companionship of the Holy Ghost and have the courage to follow the promptings that come into our lives."<sup>23</sup>

At least three different times, the *Ensign* has published articles or columns stating the film rating system should be viewed with caution. In a 1991 article, William A. Schaefermeyer, a director of development in the Church's audio-visual department, noted, "It is no secret that the MPA rating system is a poor guideline for determining

whether or not a movie or video is suitable for family viewing.”<sup>24</sup> A year earlier, former film critic and national news placement specialist in the Church’s public communications department, Joseph Walker, wrote in the “I Have a Question” column, “Judging a movie—for good or ill—solely on an MPAA rating is a little like playing Russian roulette with your standards: Maybe your values won’t be assaulted, but maybe they will.”<sup>25</sup> Kieth Merrill, a Latter-day Saint and an award-winning Hollywood director, although generally negative about R-rated movies, admitted there can be exceptions:

With a few exceptions, R-rated films have proved to be unacceptable to the tastes and moral conscience of most Latter-day Saints. . . . 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.<sup>26</sup>

Another possible reason Church leaders generally avoid singling out R-rated movies may be one of simple practicality: Mormonism’s explosive growth has expanded the Church throughout the globe, and the United States is the only country that uses the MPAA’s rating system. Other countries have their own processes. If a Church leader addressing a General Conference said, “Don’t watch R-rated movies,” it would mean absolutely nothing to most members living outside the United States.<sup>27</sup>

Given the relatively few specific statements from Church leaders about movie ratings, we must wonder why “no R-rated movies” looms so large in many members’ minds as a *sine qua non* litmus test for “good” Latter-day Saints.

One factor, I suggest, may be that when Church members hear General Authorities caution about the kinds of entertainment and films to shun, their minds link terms such as “inappropriate” with R ratings so strongly they actually believe they have heard the specific words. Indeed, even if most Church leaders have not singled out R-rated movies, many members would likely still be quick to point out that if a movie is rated R, it obviously qualifies as “inappropriate.” However, just because a film carries this rating, it may not be unsuitable for Latter-day Saints.

Another reason might stem from the fact, as my experience with my elders quorum’s listing of potentially negative influences shows, that we live in a media-saturated society; it is nearly impossible to escape its influence. Given this, perhaps the relatively few specific statements on the R rating by Church leaders naturally stand out in members’ minds as *something* that feels concrete they can do to negotiate their way in the U.S.’s chaotic media-driven culture.



Elder Alexander Morrison has noted that the violence portrayed in *Saving Private Ryan* stands in stark contrast to violence that is portrayed in some films as normal or fun.

“It’s only rated R because of violence”

EVEN WHEN A film’s content helps determine its rating, the way Church members and the rating board judge that content becomes highly subjective.<sup>28</sup> For example, statements by General Authorities have warned against watching films with violence. However, what constitutes inappropriate violence remains foggy. Films such as *Monsters Inc.*, *Home Alone*, and other family films have a significant amount of violence. Yet because the violence is cartoonish, most Church members appear to have no objection to these types of films. The *Star Wars* films contain dismemberment, beheadings, electrocution, poisoning, explosions, gunfire, and a scene of mass death in which an entire planet is blown to pieces. However, all five films are rated PG. Movies such as *The Fugitive*, the *James Bond* series, the *Lord of the Rings*, and others muddy the issue even further. All these films are rated PG or PG-13 and feature varying degrees of violence. Yet the “appropriateness” of viewing them would probably fluctuate significantly from member to member. Films such as *Black Hawk Down* and *Braveheart* contain gruesome battle sequences and are both rated R for graphic violence. Ironically, however, these films depict violence realistically and unglamorously, giving viewers a sobering look at the realities of war. Films with lesser ratings often portray violence as fun or adventurous.

Apostle M. Russell Ballard has acknowledged these kinds of differences in the way violence is portrayed in movies. Commenting on the appropriateness of the deaths of hundreds of people in the movie *Titanic*, he noted, “History is filled with sex and violence . . . Life gets taken in many different ways. It gets taken by war, it gets taken by tragedy, it gets taken by natural disaster. You cannot insulate the realities of life.”<sup>29</sup> Alexander Morrison, of the Quorum of the Seventy, even more pointedly commented on the film *Saving Private Ryan*. Stopping short of endorsing the film, he said, “It didn’t portray

violence as something that was enjoyable. It portrayed it as a horrible experience. That's different than the video games that invite people to enjoy killing and maiming and butchering other people." When asked about the importance of context in media portrayals of violence, Elder Morrison further commented, "*Private Ryan* does not portray violence as being something that you seek to enjoy, you seek to be part of. It shows brains getting splattered and men getting blown to pieces. It shows the horror of war, not the love of killing. There is no love of killing in that. You just come out of that thinking, 'Oh, how could I ever go through such a terrible experience?'" When asked if he considered *Saving Private Ryan* an appropriate depiction of violence, Elder Morrison concluded, "I wish that sort of thing never happened in our world, but it did happen. It portrays violence in its true light as something which is frightening and horrifying and degrading and dehumanizing. That's a different way of portraying violence than portraying it as something wonderful, that you win if you kill somebody else."<sup>30</sup>

#### OWNING OUR OWN RESPONSIBILITIES

*Joseph Smith's call is perhaps the best guide*

**C**LEARLY, MANY POLITICAL and social issues surround the rating system and Church members' reliance on it—too many to recount here. It's easy to attribute problems to the film-rating process. However, the rating system has never pretended to be perfect, and it has never pretended to address the needs of Latter-day Saints. A system with only five ratings to attach to several hundred films a year can do only so much. In fact, the usually defensive proponent of the rating system, Jack Valenti, president of the MPAA, acknowledges the system is limited. He notes that although not perfect, the rating system does its best to achieve its mission:

to offer to parents some advance information about movies so that parents can decide what movies they want their children to see or not to see. The entire rostrum of the rating program rests on the assumption of responsibility by parents. If parents don't care, or if they are languid in guiding their children's movie going, the rating system becomes useless.


He also notes the rating system has no other purpose than to provide parents with some information. "Indeed, if you are 18 or over, or if you have no children, the rating system has no meaning for you. Ratings are meant for parents, no one else."<sup>31</sup>

If a Church member can't rely on the rating system for information about films, where can they turn? Most newspapers and entertainment magazines provide more details than does the rating system. Websites designed for parents and sensitive viewers detail every swear word, every violent act (no matter how tame), any sex (including kissing), and any drug use (including alcohol or smoking). Some companies now embroiled in a bitter dispute with the Directors Guild of America even offer customers digitally edited films.<sup>32</sup>

However, such counting of "offenses" and such a drastic

focus on cutting or altering "inappropriate" scenes seem to ignore the spirit of the gospel. Are Latter-day Saints better off spending time counting the swear words in a movie, or are they better off seeking out good, inspirational art and entertainment? Unfortunately, the focus on what's "inappropriate" seems to have eclipsed the ability of some to focus on the positive in art and film.

Church members are required to use their own judgment in deciding what's appropriate to read in books, watch on television, listen to on the radio, or see on the Internet. What might be considered "offensive" is a deeply personal issue. If one is offended, he or she has every right to call for others to respect that. If one is not offended, he or she cannot be compelled to find it offensive. Ultimately, participating in appropriate forms of media is an individual responsibility—one which each person will be held accountable for. No Latter-day Saint gains absolution by pledging allegiance to a rating system. We all have our agency; we are all responsible for our actions.

Perhaps the answer lies in the Articles of Faith. While seeking out art and entertainment, regardless of the source, Church members might recall the words of Joseph Smith: "If there is anything virtuous, lovely, or of good report or praiseworthy, we seek after these things" (Articles of Faith 13). The word "or" suggests the Prophet did not intend Church members to seek only after things that had all four criteria. From Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* to John Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, from Walter Cronkite's reporting of the Kennedy assassination to the coverage of the 11 September attacks, from Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* to Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, from Edward Zwick's *Glory* to Steven Soderberg's *Traffic*, the artists of the world have given us works that may not always be virtuous or lovely, but for their unflinching look at aspects of the human condition, they are certainly praiseworthy and of good report—regardless of whether we choose to see them. 

#### NOTES

1. The first version of the pamphlet was published in 1990. The new edition appeared in fall 2001. See "Of Earrings and Tattoos: Church Revises Youth Pamphlet," *SUNSTONE* (Apr. 2002): 76.

2. Kirsten Stewart, "BYU to Avoid R-Rated Movies," *Salt Lake Tribune*, 21 Dec. 2002, B3. Also, see news item, page 78 of this issue.

3. The outcries began in 1915, after the release of D.W. Griffith's *Judith of Bethulia*. The LDS Church and its leaders were no exception. As early as 1920, Church leaders warned of the dangers of sex in movies.

4. David O. Selznick fought the MPAA long and hard to have Rhett Butler's famous line "Frankly my dear, I don't give a damn," remain in *Gone with the Wind*.

5. Eventually, the word "hump" was allowed to remain in the film, while the word "screw" was cut.

6. *Blow Up* dared to show Vanessa Redgrave's bare breasts.

7. Over the years, several state legislatures have tried to pass bills that would regulate the film industry in some way. Although the federal government has never passed legislation against the film industry, it has formed several committees to discuss the issue of "Hollywood and decency." Most recently, U.S. senator and former vice-presidential candidate Joseph Lieberman has been particularly outspoken. See for example, Ronald Brownstein and Megan Garvey, "What's with Bush and the Entertainment Industry?" *Salt Lake Tribune*, 7 May 2001, A3; "Report Chastises the Entertainment Industry," *Salt Lake Tribune*, 11 Sep. 2000, A7; "Tone Down Sex, Violence, Senators Tell Hollywood," *Salt Lake Tribune*, 14 Sep. 2001, A7.

8. Ratings are assigned by a board of 8 to 13 full-time members who serve for varying lengths of time. The sole requirement to sit on the board is parenthood. The board watches films and discusses possible ratings. Following the discussion, each board member fills out a survey explaining his or her reasons for their chosen rating. Ratings are finally assigned by a majority vote. If filmmakers are unsatisfied by the rating their films receive, they have two options. First, they may re-edit a film and resubmit it in the hope of getting a different rating. Second, they can appeal the board's decision to an appeals board.

The appeals board is made up of 14 to 18 members who view the film and then hear from the producer or distributor why he or she believes the original rating is unjustified. The chair of the ratings board then plays the part of the defense by explaining why the rating is appropriate for the movie in question. The producer or distributor has an opportunity for rebuttal. Appeals board members can question both representatives until they believe they have enough information. Those presenting the different viewpoints are excused from the room while the board discusses the appeal and votes by secret ballot. It requires a two-thirds majority of the members present to overturn the original rating decision. The appeals board has the final say in all ratings; however, if a filmmaker loses her or his appeal, he or she still have the choice to re-edit the film and start the ratings process fresh.

There are surprisingly few official rules governing the ratings process. If the infamous "F-word" is used in a film, the film must receive a PG-13 rating. If the same word is used to describe a sexual act and not just as an expletive, a movie must receive an R rating. (Critics of the system have often joked that, despite this rule, the MPAA must have a "Julia Roberts Exception," for Roberts has used this word as a sexual expletive in several different films, and the films have still been rated as PG-13). If a film has illegal drug use, it automatically warrants at least a PG-13 rating. There are no official rules governing violence or nudity, although most films with more than a few seconds of nudity, or any full-frontal nudity, are almost always given an R rating.

9. Following the lawsuit, some 27 Hollywood directors signed an open letter that was published in several industry publications insisting *Tie Me Up, Tie Me Down's* X rating be changed. See "Why Ratings Suck," *EOnline*, <[www.eonline.com/Features/Specials/Ratings/?hot.specials](http://www.eonline.com/Features/Specials/Ratings/?hot.specials)>.

10. A recent example occurred when Stanley Kubrick's final film, *Eyes Wide Shut*, was released. In an effort to protect its investment, Warner Brothers demanded that the version to be released in the United States be edited so it could receive an R rating—a move that outraged some critics. Roger Ebert of the *Chicago Sun-Times* was particularly outspoken and vocal, calling for the MPAA to create an "A" (Adults) rating that would fall between the R and NC-17 ratings. See Sean P. Means, "Movies, Morals, and the MPAA," *Salt Lake Tribune*, 8 Aug. 1999, D1. However, Jack Valenti, MPAA president, has repeatedly stated that no changes to the rating system are necessary. See Sean P. Means, "R Is for Rerun: The Ratings Debate Grinds On," *Salt Lake Tribune*, 18 Mar. 2001, E2.

11. Fatty Arbuckle's comedy films were known to "push the envelope" of what were considered appropriate social standards. Many considered him and those who acted with him to be lewd. His films were laced with double-entendres and jokes about sexuality (hence President Grant's comments about "surpressing the arbuckle." Arbuckle was later caught up in one of the most bizarre scandals in Hollywood history. He was charged with murdering a girl who had died of peritonitis caused by a ruptured bladder. Prosecutors insisted the bladder had been ruptured by Arbuckle when he brutally raped the girl at a party. Arbuckle insisted he was innocent and had found the girl ill in his hotel room. She died a few days later, and Arbuckle was later acquitted. For the complete story, see David Yallop, *The Day the Laughter Stopped: The True Story of Fatty Arbuckle* (New York: St. Martins Press, 1976).

12. James R. Clark, *Messages of the First Presidency*, Vol. 5 (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1971), 199.

13. See, for example, Melvin J. Ballard, *Conference Report*, April 1922, 88; David O. McKay, *Conference Report*, Oct. 1935, 99–100; Spencer W. Kimball, *Conference Report*, Apr. 1948, 107–08.

14. This search of publications has been conducted over several years. I have tried to be as thorough as possible, but I cannot guarantee to have located all published statements by Church leaders on R-rated movies. Also, unpublished statements made in more informal settings, such as stake conferences, firesides, or other meetings, are impossible to account for.

15. *Conference Reports*, Oct. 1972, 145.

16. Hartman Rector Jr., "Live above the Law to Be Free," *Ensign* (Jan. 1973): 131.

17. Gene R. Cook, *Raising up a Family to the Lord* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book 1993), 158–59.

18. "Our Standards Not To Be Dictated by Rating System," *LDS Church News*, 9 Oct. 1993.

19. Joseph P. Wirthlin, *Finding Peace in Our Lives* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1995), 67.

20. Joe J. Christensen, *One Step at a Time: Building a Better Marriage, Family, and You* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1996), 115–16. Elder Christensen is one of the few General Authorities who speak often about avoiding R-rated movies.

21. "Marriage in the Lord's Way, Part Two," *Ensign* (July 1998): 16.

22. The statement to the young men of the Aaronic Priesthood can be found in Ezra Taft Benson, *Come Listen to a Prophet's Voice* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1990), 7–8. It also appeared in the *Ensign* (May 1986): 45; *Conference Report*, April 1986 and *Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book Co.). The speech to the young women was given at a general women's meeting, 27 Sept. 1986, and can be found in *Teachings of Ezra Taft Benson*, 20–21.

Some Church members might argue that if viewing R-rated movies is not appropriate for the youth, it isn't appropriate for adults. This logic seems oversimplified. Certainly there are a great number of things that young people are not allowed to do that are not forbidden to adults. Marriage, voting, and driving privileges are just a few examples of things for which we as a society regularly invoke maturity guidelines.

23. L. Tom Perry, "That Spirit Which Leadeth to Do Good," *Ensign* (May 1997): 70.

24. William A. Schaefermeyer, "Can I Watch a Movie?" *Ensign* (Dec. 1991): 29–32.

25. Joseph Walker, "I Have a Question," *Ensign* (Sept. 1990): 72.

26. Kieth Merrill, "I Have a Question," *Ensign* (Apr. 1981): 24.

27. The rating systems in other countries range from very complex to practically non-existent. For example, France tends to be extremely easygoing about ratings, allowing almost anyone to see almost anything. However, other European countries are much more stringent about films that feature violence. Films with "natural" nudity (defined in Great Britain as nudity not depicted as sexual or erotic in any way) can be given the most lenient rating while films promoting racism can be banned altogether.

Great Britain's certification system is much more comprehensive than the U.S. rating system. Often theme and message are taken into account. For example, *Saving Private Ryan*, *Schindler's List*, *Black Hawk Down*, and other realistic war films received the British "15" rating (no one under 15 admitted). However, films featuring far less but more fictionalized or glamorized violence, such as *The Terminator*, received an "18" rating (no one under 18 admitted). Canada has no nationwide rating system; ratings usually vary from province to province. For example, a film might receive a "14" rating (Adult accompaniment required for under 14) in Nova Scotia but receive an "18A" rating (Adult accompaniment required for under 18) in British Columbia.

28. Ideally, the content of a film ought to be what determines its rating. Unfortunately, the many changing factors surrounding the ratings board and its policies do not guarantee that content alone will influence a film's rating. There are very few criteria that actually guide the ratings board. Also, a board ten years ago may have rated one film entirely differently than the current board would. For example, the film *Psycho* by Alfred Hitchcock has actually been issued three different ratings based on different releases. When the rating system was first introduced, *Psycho* received an "M" rating (equivalent to today's PG). Later, it was released with an R, and a few years later, another theatrical release saw *Psycho* given a PG-13 rating.

Because of the lack of guidelines, filmmakers often work to exploit the flaws in the rating system. For example, many directors will pad their films with scenes intended to be cut later in an effort to appease the ratings board. If the impression is given that they cut a lot of scenes, the ratings board will often reward filmmakers with a PG-13 rating for "trying to work with the board," regardless of what content might remain in the film. For examples, see "Why Ratings Suck," *EOnline*, <[www.eonline.com/Features/Specials/Ratings/?hot.specials](http://www.eonline.com/Features/Specials/Ratings/?hot.specials)>.

Other politics can play a role in the rating system. When Clint Eastwood's movie, *A Perfect World* was given an R, he insisted the ratings board reconsider. Because of his clout and prestige, the ratings board changed the rating to PG-13 without requiring Eastwood to make changes.

29. Interview with the *Salt Lake Tribune*, 10 May 1999. Although the complete transcript of this interview was not published in the newspaper, the *Tribune* did make it available on its website at <[www.sltrib.com](http://www.sltrib.com)>. Copy in my possession.

30. *Ibid.*

31. Valenti's comments can be found on the MPAA's website at <[www.mpa.org](http://www.mpa.org)>.

32. "Fight over Clean Movies Gets Dirty," *SUNSTONE* (Oct. 2002), 76.