

# The Curse of NC-17

*Filmmakers avoid it, theaters fear it, moviegoers rarely see it*

Madonna's latest film, *Body of Evidence*, is racy—no surprise there. But when rough cuts of the movie began circulating and the Motion Picture Association of America slapped it with an NC-17 rating, Hollywood began to buzz.

The NC-17 rating, the once-heralded, now-ineffective label for adult cinema, had grown rusty from disuse. Films stigmatized with the label were taboo, shunned by those in "the business" as a commercial kiss of death. Perhaps, insiders hoped, with Madonna's name, this film would survive

the label, make big bucks and establish NC-17 as a viable outlet for mature moviemaking.

But when Madonna and her sex found the cutting room floor, it was back to reality in Tinseltown. And a safe R rating, instead of the dreaded NC-17.

In the case of *Body of Evidence*, the MPAA objected to "the extreme nature of the sexuality," says Stephen Deutsch, executive producer of the movie. "All the scenes remain intact," he says. "A few frames had to be removed here and there that were too explicit."

But just what is too explicit? And does

NC-17 really solve the problems posed by the X rating? Deutsch says no. "Most of the audiences don't know what NC-17 means," he says.

The idea behind a NC-17 rating seemed relatively simple. If films were given this rating, they might avoid the fatal mark of being an X-rated film, with no chance of making it to the local theaters.

But an NC-17 mark has become just as deadly for filmmakers. And movies like *Damage*, a New Line Cinema creation, are left to walk the murky line between R and X.

*Damage* stars Jeremy Irons as a British member of Parliament who becomes obsessed with his son's girlfriend, played by Juliette Binoche. When New Line submitted the film to the MPAA, it was handed an NC-17 rating.

The rating did not sit well with the studio, which said the film from French director Louis Malle, was getting a bum rap. "*Damage* has much less real, physical nudity than *Basic Instinct*," says New Line's President of Marketing and Distribution Mitchell Goldman.

While advance publicity for the film was erotic, most of the lovemaking scenes between Irons and Binoche aren't as shocking as many of those between other on-screen couples. Ultimately, the studio decided to cut a few of the more graphic scenes and the film received an R rating.

NC-17 began well enough, when the rating was created in 1990 and first used to label the film *Henry and June*, to indicate that no children under 17 were allowed to see the film. The MPAA, under pressure from Universal Studios, (which released *Henry and June*) and dozens of other important film industry names, created the rating to take the place of the X ranking, which means the same thing but carries connotations of pornography.

The MPAA's voluntary rating system (G, PG, R, X) was drawn up in 1968. Until then, all films had to adhere to "The Production Code," which dictated what kind of content was suitable in movies. MPAA President Jack Valenti at the time decided the system was nothing less than thinly veiled censorship. So the MPAA, in conjunction with many figures in the film industry, religious organizations and leaders of the National Association of Theater Owners, created the voluntary rating system.

But the X rating never was copyrighted

like the G, PG and R ratings. Makers of low-rent skin flicks were free to capitalize on the X's connotations of adult-oriented material and began pasting as many Xs as they pleased on their films. Soon the X rating became associated with pornography, and many theaters, newspapers and TV stations refused to display X-rated films or ads for them.

That's where the industry remained until NC-17 was created. But the solution has proven almost as difficult as the problem.

Many filmmakers are starting to suspect there is a double standard in the MPAA ratings of their films. *Basic Instinct* is a frequently cited example. It is a mainstream thriller, featuring numerous scenes depicting violent sex. But in *Total Recall*, another blood-fest with an enormous body count, a man's arms are severed on screen. *Basic Instinct* got the scissors. *Total Recall* got the MPAA's blessings.

And even if a film company is willing to risk an NC-17 rating, many movie theaters have restrictions written into their leases against showing NC-17 films. Mary-Ann Grasso, executive director of the National Association of Theater Owners, says oftentimes screenings of NC-17 movies must be held for theater landlords, who "in many cases will relent and show the film." It depends on the picture, she says.

Setting up screenings for landlords is a cumbersome and tedious process and is not always feasible, Goldman says.

Restrictions against NC-17 films are a form of commercial censorship, without any one perpetrator, he says. Though the films are not censored, they are inhibited from reaching broad audiences.

"If it is a picture of quality and is appropriate for their community," landlords usually are willing to show NC-17 films. As theaters negotiate new leases, restrictions against NC-17 films likely will be lifted, Grasso says.

Because NC-17 is young, the film community hasn't decided whether the rating will survive as an alternative to the X category. But as long as theaters are wary of showing NC-17 rated films, major films' grosses will be threatened and cutting films down to R ratings will remain the most viable option.

*Body of Evidence's* Deutsch says, "If we had gone out with an NC-17, the entire focus of everyone's attention would be on the rating rather than on the content." □

## An affair with your son's lover could cause serious *Damage*

*Damage* is a complex, eloquent and melancholy film that leaves you with a bitter aftertaste. It tells a psychological horror story so unsettling it literally drains the emotions, devastates the mind and depresses the soul.

Produced and directed by Louis Malle, *Damage* makes no attempt to heighten the drama by using stylized camera angles or sharp editing cuts. As a result, Malle delivers a harrowing film about self-destruction and obsession that reaches the depths of tragedy.

The focus of *Damage* is the illicit affair of Stephen Fleming (Jeremy Irons), a British politician, with his son's girlfriend, Anna Barton (Juliette Binoche). Fleming lets his weaknesses break through the cracks of his charming facade and lets uncontrollable lust get the better of him. In fact, the lusty



scenes in this flick almost earned it an NC-17 rating.

From beginning to end, the images in the film are stark and disturbing. Watching *Damage* is a little like being a voyeur, looking through a window, watching two people having violent sex bordering on masochism. Fleming is seen pounding

Anna's head on the floor, attacking her like a wild animal. The sexual acts are cold, evoking images of evil and danger.

The screenplay by David Hare, from the novel by Josephine Hart, and the last direction by Malle bring out startling performances from the cast. Irons gives a top-notch performance as Fleming. An actor who virtually has made a career of portraying tentative, insecure characters through the TV series "Bridgeshead Revisited" and in the films *Betrayal* and *Dead Ringers*, Irons is believable and riveting as a man who falls prey to his own passions and loses his perception of reality.

And Binoche is subdued and eerie as Barton, the young woman with a past. Binoche expresses more emotion through the blankness in her face than any line of dialogue she delivers.

*Damage* is an outstanding film, not lacking in any category, except perhaps, for a happy ending. But then again *Damage* is no *Fresh Wounds* or *Judith* or *Julius*, U. of Southern California