

The Golden Gate(keeper) of Hollywood: How the MPAA Ratings System Covertly Censors Queer Film

The movies you watch are chosen for you. While censorship in modern cinema may not encompass the immense restrictions first imposed by the MPAA (Motion Picture Association of America) from the early 1920s to the late 1960s, the films we are exposed to remain almost handpicked by the “Big Eight” cinematic conglomerates¹, their selection covertly hidden behind the curtain of what is known as the MPAA ratings system. Although intended to lift content censorship in film while also “[providing] parents with the information needed to determine if a film is appropriate for their children”, the MPAA ratings system quickly proved to be cinematic censorship presented in a more digestible, disguised form (Motion Picture Academy). Films whose content had previously been banned from the screen were now simply given X (adults only)² or R (restricted to 16 and up if unaccompanied) ratings in order to limit their accessible audience, popularity, impact, and overall box office success. Two genres of film which especially fell prey to the restrictive claws of the rating system were Queer and Feminist film. Often times, queer feminist films received (and still receive) exponentially harsher ratings despite their content being far less sexual or violent than their straight counterparts. This is due to the societal “taboo” surrounding their subject matter which in turn causes ratings to be based on how *societally* accepted/ appropriate the film is with little regard for the actual promiscuity and/or gore being presented on screen. This research paper seeks to, through the comparative content analysis and box office of films *Rachel, Rachel* (Paul Newman,

¹ The MPAA was originally comprised of the “Big Eight” film studios which include: Paramount Pictures, Fox Film (20th Century Fox), Loews (MGM), Universal Pictures, United Artists, Warner Brothers (1923), and Columbia Pictures (1924). MGM is considered the eight in the “Big Eight”, its creation resulting from the merger of Loews, Metro Pictures, Goldwyn Pictures, and RKO Pictures in 1928.

² The “X” rating was adapted in 1968 with the MPAA ratings system but was replaced by the “NC-17” rating in 1990 due to audiences associating “X” ratings with pornography.

1968) and *Romeo and Juliet* (Franco Zeffireli, 1968), prove that the MPAA unfairly rates queer film in the name of censorship, profit, and collective morality. Furthermore, I aim to answer the question of how unfair MPAA ratings of Queer film content effects film exposure, box office success, and most importantly accessibility for LGBTQ+ youth audiences to relatable and educational queer film narratives?

In order to display how the MPAA ratings system unfairly targets queer film, I have compiled and analyzed a number of primary and secondary documents discussing the initial creation of the MPAA, the instillation and effects of the MPAA ratings system, and public reactions regarding the efficacy and impact of this rating system on the film industry. Following this, I conducted primary source research pertaining to the financial history, distribution, box office success and critical reception of both *Rachel, Rachel* and Zeffireli's *Romeo and Juliet*. Furthermore, I conducted a content analysis of both films to determine their level of sexual insinuation, nudity, and violence. Finally, I examined a number of secondary sources discussing the history of MPAA censorship of queer film and the negative effects of this censorship on queer communities, particularly queer youth. In light of my research findings, I argue that the plainly unfair Restricted rating of *Rachel, Rachel* not only occurred because of a minor display of queer content, but actively feeds into the damaging narrative of queer relationships and sex as taboo and unacceptable both on screen and in society existing at the time of its release.

I. Context: The Creation of the MPAA ratings system and the late 1960s

The movies you watch are chosen for you- but to understand how and why, one must understand why the MPAA was initially created, how it developed, and where overt censorship ends, and covert gatekeeping begins. Founded in 1922 by the “Big Eight” and headed by Republican politician Will Hayes, the MPAA arose in response to increased state government censorship of film content resulting from “public outcry against both indecency on the screen and various scandals

involving movie celebrities” (Britannica). In 1930, the MPAA adopted the “Motion Picture Production Code” which was replaced by the MPAA rating system in 1968. This occurred as studios realized that not only was enforcing the code nearly impossible with the introduction of television and foreign film, but that the general “morality” of a film does not determine its success. Introduced by MPAA president Jack Valenti, the ratings system sought to protect freedom of speech and creative expression while maintaining societal responsibility (“Ratings Start”, *Variety*).

The new ratings system was first presented as follows: “ [the] new code will provide four ratings: (1) okay for general audiences, (2) ditto but “suggested for mature audiences,” (3) admission under 16 only with parent and (4) no one under 16 admitted at any circumstance” (“Ratings Start”, *Variety*). Eventually these ratings were labeled “G, PG, R and X”

The time at which the ratings system was installed, as well as the time at which *Rachel, Rachel* and Zeffireli’s *Romeo and Juliet* were both released, was one of great turbulence and polarization. While the United States was seeing major liberal radicalization regarding sex, war, racism, and queer rights, the opposition of the conservative right was just as potent. Underscored by the events of the ongoing Vietnam War, the late 1960s and early 70s saw ground breaking events including: the founding of the National Organization for Women (1967) and their fight in favor of the Equal Rights Amendment, the protest calling for an end to the Vietnam war at the 1968 Democratic National convention and the trial of the Chicago 7, the Stonewall Riots in response to police violence against the queer community, and the assassinations of both Martin Luther King Jr. (April 4, 1968) and Robert F. Kennedy (June 5, 1968). Furthermore, having recently exited the Cold War, the United States was a battle ground determined to enforce freedom of speech while maintaining traditional capitalist policy. Needless to say, the United States was split down the middle with those fighting for liberation and those who believed in the conservative, censored values of “traditional” American life. The MPAA ratings system fell under the pressure of both sides,

struggling to appease liberal creative freedom of expression while also providing regulations to maintain societally “appropriate” content.

II. The Practice of Covert Censorship: How the MPAA prioritized big studio profit and conservative values resulting in the Gatekeeping of Queer Film

“Freedom of expression does not mean toleration of license” (Sandler, 2007 as cited in Nurik, 2018).

While the MPAA operated under the guise of expressive freedom and equality, when placed under a microscope, it becomes clear that their ratings system functions to maintain the hegemony, industry control, profit, and conservatism; this can be seen from the very top of the MPAA hierarchy. While presented as a democratic process, the ratings system depicts something more similar to an Oligarchy, with ratings being assigned by the Classification and Rating Administration (CARA). CARA is comprised of 8 to 13 individuals located in Los Angeles California and, “with the exception of three senior raters, the identity of these individuals is withheld from the public...” (Nurik, 535). The only qualification for a position on CARA is parenthood of a child aged 5 to 15. More than this, “CARA is a branch of the MPAA, this means the same organization produces films, rates them, and handles the appeals process, allowing the industry to consolidate its power and to extend its control through all aspects of production” (Nurik, 536). This means, not only are the members of CARA anonymous in identity and morality, but they are also handpicked by the MPAA. To top this off, solidifying the conservative favoritism of CARA and the ratings system is the overwhelming support they received from the US Christian community’s film spokesman, the Catholic Office of Motion Picture, and the Council of Churches of Motion Pictures (“If MPAA Ratings Really Effective Catholics Might Abolish Theirs”, *Variety*).

The heterogeneity and hegemony of CARA can be seen in data cataloguing film ratings. Between the years 1968 and 1986, 5,000 films were assigned MPAA ratings (“MPAA Ratings Total Since 68”, *Variety*). According to *Variety*, of the 3,220 pictures submitted by 14 significant production companies (members of the MPAA) 35% took R ratings. In comparison the 3,784 independent films offered up of evaluation (not MPAA affiliated), 53% took R ratings. An even more shocking disparity, “only 11% of all X ratings have gone to films released by major companies” while 89% of X ratings have been applied to indie pictures (“MPAA Ratings Total Since 68”, *Variety*). This is significant as indie films often tend to discuss controversial subject matter as a result of not being attached to a larger production company and thus are not subject to company censorship. Higher ratings mean an increasingly restricted audience and subsequently less impact. In assigning a significantly larger amount of R and X ratings to indie films, CARA is simultaneously gatekeeping contended subject matters in the name of “societal responsibility” which, in this case, is synonymous to conservatism.

If we compare the ratings data of independent films to that of queer films released between 1968 and 1976, a similar pattern appears. Of the 53 queer films listed as released during this time period by the Internet Movie Database (IMDB), only 9.44% received G or PG-13³ ratings. In contrast, 5.66% received ‘X’ ratings and a whopping 47.17% were assigned ‘R’ ratings, prohibiting their audience significantly and constricting queer narratives from becoming normalized on screen. The remaining 39.62% of queer films released remained unrated, choosing not to subject themselves to the discrimination of the MPAA. While this saved these films from an unfair rating, “to show a film to the public, a filmmaker must play by the MPAA’s rules, enforcing a form of

³ The PG-13 rating was not implemented until 1984, thus the PG-13 rating in this case is the current rating given in place of the original.

economic control that resembles (in a less extreme form) the process that existed during the Hays Code” meaning that theaters were financially bullied by the MPAA into limiting or completely disallowing the screening of unrated films, many of which contain queer content.

So why are these ratings inequitable? Because more often than not, R rated films containing queer content contain equally as much or less sexually explicit scenes nudity, profanity, and violence than their PG or PG-13 straight counterparts.

To fully grasp the prejudiced nature of these ratings, we can turn to the comparison of Paul Newman’s *Rachel, Rachel* and Franco Zeffireli’s *Romeo and Juliet*. While both films are a telling of a coming of age through the exploration of love and sexuality, one is far more sexually explicit and violent than the other. Franco Zeffireli’s *Romeo and Juliet*, rated ‘G’ upon release, is excused of its various profanities due to the fact that it is a classic heterosexual love narrative, while *Rachel, Rachel*, which exhibits significantly less graphic material, is rated ‘R’ due to queer themes and themes of sexual exploration. The first instance of sexual contact in each film is a kiss. In *Rachel, Rachel*, Rachel and Calla, Rachel’s co-worker, and friend, stand outside of Calla’s church as Rachel cries following an intense “coming to God” experience with a traveling priest. The two women share a lengthy hug which ends in Calla leaning in and kissing Rachel as their embrace ends. Rachel is both shocked and slightly disturbed, running away in a frenzy of overwhelm. A similar situation occurs when Romeo and Juliet share their first kiss. After first seeing each other at the Capulet ball, Romeo follows Juliet into a secluded corner of the crowded ballroom. Resisting his flirtatious remarks stating, “Saints do not move”, Juliet attempt to walk away. Romeo. However, moves in front of her blocking her exit. As he does this he states “then do not move while my prayers do take” while sensually touching her lips before pulling her into a kiss. Here we can see that both scenes are highly similar, both exhibiting a forceful first kiss. Ratings-wise, there are only two notable content differences: In *Rachel, Rachel* the characters are both 35 years old, while in *Romeo and Juliet* they

are 14 and 16 and one couple is heterosexual while the other is queer. Looking only at this instance, one can see that there should be no disparity and rating between these two films. However, as both films continue, *Rachel, Rachel* remains limited in sexual and violent content while *Romeo and Juliet* becomes increasingly promiscuous and gory.

Following the kiss scene between Calla and Rachel, *Rachel, Rachel* experiences no other sexual acts between the two women. However, the film does insinuate sex two additional times, both with a man. The first occurs after Rachel's first date when she is coaxed reluctantly into having what is suggested to be intercourse. Here we only see the couple kissing and Rachel's shoulder being exposed before the scene ends. The second instance there is no sexual contact; sexual activity is only suggested by the characters being covered in sheets seemingly without clothes. The film does, however, continue to explore Rachel's sexuality and sexual preference as she opens herself up to masturbation, possible motherhood and even allowing Calla back into her life. While the two never experience anymore on-screen sexual contact, they do share an emotionally intimate relationship with a clear romantic tension. This tension is confirmed the end of the film when Rachel gives Calla a bittersweet goodbye, kissing her on the cheek and remarking, "I wish I could have been different to you", before departing for Oregon. In total, Calla, the only homosexual character's screen time totals 19 minutes, making "queer content" a total of approx. 19% of the film; only 2 of these minutes displaying a homosexual act (a single kiss). Additionally, the film experiences no violence and only depicts death twice, neither time depicting blood or gore.

In comparison, Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* exhibits 3 more instances of the couple not only kissing but making out rather intensely. In addition to this, at time mark 1:34, we see a scene which begins with Romeo and Juliet lying in bed naked, Romeo's bare behind fully exposed. We see his bare butt once again just seconds later as he gets up to dress himself. Throughout the scene, the two kiss and passionately hug each other as Romeo lays his head on Juliet's naked breast. Concluding the

scene, Juliet rushes to kick Romeo out before they are caught; during her frenzy we see a full-frontal exposure of her breasts. This scene alone contains far more sexual exposure than the entirety of *Rachel, Rachel*. Furthermore, this portion of the film is not only displaying nudity and suggesting sexual contact but suggests sexual contact between two minors. *Romeo and Juliet* also experiences two instances of overt violence: Mercutio and Tybalt's respective deaths. Both death sequences are comprised of a violent sword fight ending in the stabbing, bleeding, and onscreen death of both characters. The story then ends in another act of violence when both Romeo and Juliet commit suicide, Juliet stabbing herself and dying on screen.

Not only does Zeffirelli's film display significantly more sexual acts and nudity, but it also contains instances of violence and gore, something *Rachel, Rachel* lacks. It is clear that *Rachel, Rachel* has not been rated by its sexual explicitly, but by the single instance of a kiss shared between two woman and subtle references to homosexual exploration.

III. Critical Reception and Box Office Success

Despite their comparatively similar content, critical receptions of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Rachel, Rachel* made clear that when it comes to acceptable promotion and audience targeting, ratings are everything. In their review of the film, *Current Film Reviews* notes that "Franco Zeffirelli described his new film production *Romeo and Juliet* as an attempt to create a "definitive" version of the play for this generation. Specifically, he seems to mean the younger generation, and the promotional campaign for this movie will be aimed rather aggressively at the youth market." With a G rating, despite its sexual and violent content, society accepted the marketing of *Romeo and Juliet* to the teen market, applauding Zeffirelli for his youthful rendition without batting an eye. Film distributor Paramount even went so far as to announce publicly that in spite of previous plans, the youth-oriented Franco Zeffirelli production will not be roadshown... due to "extensive market research [showing] that the young audience at which the picture is aimed is more willing to wait in

line to see a film than to plan and buy tickets in advance” (Zefferelli’s ‘Romeo and Juliet’ Not to Be Roadshown, *Boxoffice*). A nationwide teen premier program was even created to further distribute the film among teen communities.

On the contrary, *Rachel, Rachel* was frequently painted by reviewers as only having potential appeal as a “woman’s art film” whose plot revolves around “‘old’ people (35 and up)”, a fact that “does not help its acceptability” (*Rachel, Rachel*, *Variety*). Rated R and perceived as a film for the ailing generation, reviews of *Rachel, Rachel* do not succeed in capturing the complexity and importance of self-exploration that sits at the heart of the film. Additionally, such reviews skewed the film’s market away from youth audiences painting it as unappealing for anyone under the ripe old age of 35.

Further ostracizing *Rachel, Rachel*’s potential youth audience and queer audience, reviews either condemn and overexaggerate its inappropriate content or fail to mention homosexuality at all. In their review of the film, *Feature Reviews* remarks that *Rachel, Rachel* is “Definitely not for children the film contains scenes of masturbation, female-female kissing and an affair with a schoolteacher...”. Comparing this review to the actual content of the film, the only correct statement is the fact that there is “female-female” kissing. The film shows neither onscreen masturbation nor sex between Rachel and a schoolteacher but alludes to them only once with no physical depiction. It seems that according to this review, what truly makes *Rachel, Rachel* inappropriate for children is a single kiss between two adult women. *Variety* describes the kiss as “Lesbian pass at Miss Woodward, a pitiable and somewhat touching plot point...”, framing it as the sorry attempt of a Lesbian to coerce her friend into homosexuality. The article goes on to build this pitiful view of Calla stating that “There doesn’t seem to be a normal, well-adjusted person in Rachel’s life.” In The Independent Journal’s review of *Rachel, Rachel*, Rachel’s homosexual encounter is completely dismissed, the author her *first* sexual experience as being with the young man she begins to see

shortly after kissing Calla. The article goes on, leaving out any mention of Estelle Parsons' character (Calla), mentioning her only at the end among a list of names that appear in the film.

Critical reception of *Romeo and Juliet* was also far more positive, framing the film as intriguing and perfect for the current majority audience youthful filmgoers. Describing Zeffirelli's work as "...a first-rate art house attraction...", *Current Film Reviews* frames *Romeo and Juliet* as the must-see cinematic attraction of the year. *Rachel, Rachel* however did not see such praise. While the film was well respected and eventually Oscar nominated, reviews paint a dreary picture of the film's story line. In *The Independent Journal*, *Feature Reviews*, and *Variety* *Rachel's* character is described as devoid of any youthful, sexual, or dynamic traits:

Rachel, Rachel is the story of a "Spinster schoolteacher" (*Rachel, Rachel, The Independent Journal*)

"Miss Woodward is compelling and totally believable throughout as an aging small-town virgin"

(*Rachel, Rachel, Feature Reviews*).

-*Rachel, Rachel* is "...a low-key melodrama starring Joanne Woodward as a spinster awakening to life" (*Rachel, Rachel, Variety*).

These reviews neither praise the film, nor accurately display any of its central themes of coming of age (regardless of age), sexual awakening, sexual exploration, and the courage to step into individual selfhood. It is clear from these reviews that critics are far more willing to support youth marketing and praise films with heterosexual protagonists despite graphic sexual content... as long as this content isn't "gay".

Beyond critical reception, if one turns to the financial detail and box office success of *Rachel, Rachel* in comparison to *Romeo and Juliet*, the negative consequences of receiving an 'R' rating become clear. The stats (found on IMDB) are as follows:

Rachel, Rachel: Gross Revenue: \$3,000,000; Budget: \$728,000; Dist.: Warner Brothers

Romeo and Juliet: Gross Revenue: \$38.9 million; Budget: \$850,000 (estimated) Distributer:
Paramount Pictures

Both *Rachel, Rachel* and *Romeo and Juliet* began with similar production budgets and were both distributed by major production companies; however, *Romeo and Juliet* saw a gross revenue nearly 13 times greater than *Rachel, Rachel*. When it comes to production, distribution and box office success, the only differences seen between these two films is in the presence of queer content, ratings, and subsequent critical reception.

IV. The Cultural Effects of Gatekeeping Queer Media

As argued by Haskell Wexler in *Boxoffice*, “young people... can go to their local theater and view the most incredible scenes of ...bloodshed in films that have been overlooked by those who think only sex is harmful.” According to Wexler, the ratings system promotes “a kind of puritan, adolescent suggestiveness while discouraging a more honest, and ultimately more healthy approach to sex and violence” (Haskell Wexler Flays MPAA Rating System, *Boxoffice*). The censorship of *Rachel, Rachel* is a prime example in support of this argument.

A narrative of sexual exploration and coming of age (at any point in life), *Rachel, Rachel* had the potential to be highly impactful to queer youth at the time of its release. As Rachel begins to experience both homosexual and heterosexual romantic and sexual attraction, she becomes increasingly confident in her individuality and identity as a single, adult woman. By the end of the film, Rachel, once unable to even speak about sex, is able to fully acknowledge her experiences and their contribution to her growth into selfhood. Unlike many films at the time, *Rachel, Rachel* promoted the normalization of sexual exploration as an important part of growing up. Had then film been allowed greater exposure to youth audiences, perhaps its narrative would have shown queer

youth that sex is an important part of life that is unique for each person- you must explore to learn what you like, and whatever that may be, it is okay.

The lack of exposure and impact of *Rachel, Rachel* to and on youth audiences due to its 'R' rating resulting from its queer content is only one example in a much larger cultural pattern of blocking queer narratives from popular media that continues today. Since its adoption, the MPAA ratings system has been modified only five times; these modifications consist only of the addition of ratings (PG-13) or the reaming of ratings (X to NC-17. This means that even in 2022, film is still being rated based on the standards of a system created in 1968. Even in 2022, queer youth still struggle to access media that is relatable and educational.

In the “screen age”, youth turn to media for information and education. In a study conducted by Savin-Williams & Diamond in 2004, it was determined that “Teens, whether gay, straight, or uncertain, spend a significant amount of their time engaging with the media for information about sex (Drushel, 178). Furthermore, studies conducted by Steele and Brown (JD) in “Adolescent Room Culture” (2005) have resulted in a “proposed a model in which adolescents interact with the media developmentally, socially, and culturally, shaping and transforming their encounters with it in a process that facilitates meaning-making. Integral to that model is identity formation and navigating sexual relationships and is part of an environment in which they experiment with possible selves” (Larson, 1995 as cited in Drushel, 2020). When systems like MPAA ratings covertly censor content that is deemed by an outdated generation to be societally harmful, they block teenagers, queer or not, from a major source of information and thus deter their sexual development and a healthy coming of age. Moreover, for many children and adolescents, access to imperative sexually educational media is no assured “given barriers imposed by lack of transportation, protective parents, and institutional self-censorship” as well as socio economic status (Drushel, 179). To censor media is to cut off a line

of communication and general sexual understanding and thus personal sexual understanding for young audiences.

“Cinematic coming-out narratives solidify a sense of community and identity by connecting individual experiences to those that are shared” (Gross, 2001 as cited in Drushel, 2020). When presented in a positive light, queer narratives provide validation for queer youth. Representation in the media is a significant part of marginalized communities’ ability to feel represented and seen. When LGBTQ+ youth are able to see themselves in the characters they watch on screen, not only does it bring a sense of validity to their identity, but it promotes confidence and openness in one’s own sexuality. This allows for queer adolescents to feel more secure in themselves, allowing them to step out of the closet knowing that there are many who have done so before them, and they do not exist alone.

“Policies of the MPAA/CARA marginalize and stigmatize LGBTQ characters and stories, making them less accessible not just to the audiences most likely to identify with them but also to the audiences less likely to understand them and to interact peaceably with Them” (Drushel, 184). A pivotal aspect of change is exposure. When those who hold prejudice against marginalized populations make personal contact with such populations, this contact fosters a reduction of such prejudice. Queer media is just as important to those who relate to it as it is to change the minds of those who are against it

V. Conclusion

“As Gerbner and Gross (1976) have noted, representation in our culture’s mediated reality is, in and of itself, power” (Gerber, 1976 as cited in Drushel, 2020).

For decades, the MPAA has continued to rate queer films unfairly and harshly, deeming their content as harmful to society. This pattern is evident from the founding of the MPAA/CARA ratings system in 1968 as seen through the ratings of *Rachel, Rachel* (R) and *Romeo and Juliet* (G) despite

Rachel, Rachel containing content far less sexually and violently inappropriate. Such ratings have caused the critical acclaim, audience reach, and box office success of queer films to experience significant negative impacts. As a result, queer film remains highly inaccessible to those who need it most: LGBTQ+ youth. Subsequently, queer adolescents have been blocked from important sources of education and validation in their sexuality. This lack of validation robs queer adolescents of their ability to see a community beyond themselves and feel justified in their identity. Systematic censorship of film is, in this sense, symbolic annihilation.

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