



GORY DAYS

Since movies began, make-up has played a role in ratings

by Chris Koestuk

If there's one thing Howard Berger will always remember about working on the *Kill Bill* films, it's the blood. Berger, a partner in KNB EFX Group, estimates his team used 400 times the amount of a usual shoot. And after 18 hours in a hot Hong Kong location, Berger, Chris Nelson and Jake McKinnon would make quite an entrance at their upscale hotel.

"The three of us would trounce through the concierge area leaving bloody footprints everywhere," said Berger, who also worked with *Kill Bill* director Quentin Tarantino on *Pulp Fiction* and is currently prepping Tarantino's next feature, *Django Unchained*. "Our clothes were covered in blood. We were covered in blood. It was almost like we were wearing war paint."

Berger estimates that he conquered every blood gag known to man on that shoot—a detail not unnoticed by the Motion Picture Association of America. The organization, whose job it is to assign ratings to films for U.S. theatrical distribution, decided *Kill Bill*'s gore and violence deserved an NC-17, a rating that bars any viewers younger than 17.

But an NC-17 rating has greater ramifications than just restricting youth. Many theater chains won't show these films. Some newspapers are gun-shy about accepting their ads. TV stations will only run their spots late at night—if at all. And major retail outlets, most notably Walmart, won't carry the DVD. With millions in revenue at stake, NC-17 is the last thing distributors want. Most studios contractually require a filmmaker to avoid it.

When a film is rated NC-17, it's presumed to be due to sexual content. And there's no argument that the most notorious ratings battles revolve around films containing full-frontal nudity and/or graphic sex acts. But does the MPAA's rating board go easier on gore than it does on sex?

Well, yes and no.

Many films have received an NC-17 for excessive violence or gore. At least one entry in each of the *Hotel Saus*, *Halloween*, *Friday the 13th* and *Nightmare on Elm Street* series has faced this fate. But in almost every instance, the films are cut, resubmitted and re-rated R. And the carnage doesn't seem to have suffered in the process. When it comes to gore, the MPAA appears to draw a fine line between R and NC-17.

As Berger recalls, all his work on *Kill Bill: Vol. 1* is in the R-rated release. He does note that the House of Blue Leaves segment—the film's bloodiest—appears in black and white. The Japanese version features the sequence in glorious living color. "They love the gore," said Berger.

Approximately a minute was lost in going from NC-17 to R. Images American moviegoers missed include the Bride pop-

ping out an adversary's eye, an ensuing shot that sees this foe's other eye thrown into the mouth of another attacker and a shot of the first adversary getting slashed across the chest, covering a wall with blood. Despite the delusions, few will argue the *Kill Bill* films aren't violent enough. Even fewer make-up artists believe filmmakers are overly concerned about ratings.

"Actually it's quite the opposite," said François Dagenais, who created prosthetics for *Saw II*, *III*, *IV* and *V*. "With the amount of time and money given, we always try to go full out. Usually if 100 percent of the gore is there, they can shoot around it if it's too much."

"We never say, 'Hey, that might be a bit too much,'" agreed Colin Penman, make-up department head for *Saw VI* and *Saw 3D*, after working as a key make-up artist on *Saw V*, an assistant on *Saw IV* and a puppet builder on *Saw II*.

"They might struggle trying to make the rating during editing, but on the day of the shoot it's usually them saying, 'more blood, more blood, more blood.'"

Tom Savini, whose résumé is filled with films that have given the MPAA nightmares, including *Dawn of the Dead*, *Maniac* and *Eyes of a Stranger*, insists ratings were never an issue. "I was always told to go for it. I can't think of anything that was cut," he said.

Since cinema's early days, filmmakers have aspired to "too much." And when they're successful, often, someone gets upset.

Cinefiles consider F.W. Murnau's 1922 silent *Nosferatu* one of the best vampire films ever made. A key reason is the ghoulish make-up on Max Schreck's Count Orlok. *Nosferatu* producer Albin Grau is believed to have designed the iconic look—creepy to this day. In its initial release, *Nosferatu* was banned in both Sweden and Turkey due to extreme blood and gore. The former blocked its exhibition for more than 50 years. The latter finally allowed it to be shown in 2006.

Widely considered a masterpiece, James Whale's 1931 *Frankenstein* was not without controversy. The pre-code horror classic sent several state censorship boards into overdrive. Kansas requested so many cuts, the resulting movie would have been run in half the time. The boards of Massachusetts, Pennsylvania and New York were particularly disturbed by Frankenstein's monster accidentally drowning a young girl.

"Most audiences, certainly in America, had never seen anything like the monster created by Jack Pierce and enacted by Boris Karloff," said film historian Leonard Maltin via email. "It's almost impossible to put ourselves back in time to picture what it would have been like to witness such a grotesque sight for the first time—but for many, it was genuinely shock. It must have been all the more shocking when, in the one scene that humanizes the monster, he winds up killing an innocent girl."

Maltin notes that as stunned as the audience was by the monster, the film was a monster hit. Generating multiple sequels, the franchise thrives to this day. But the notorious scene in question was radically cut. The '30s audiences only saw the monster extend his hands toward the girl. The offending footage of him picking her up and throwing her in the lake stayed hidden in the Universal vaults until 1986.

Another pre-code film that caused an uproar was Tod Browning's 1931 *Freaks*. Browning, who had gained fame bringing Bela Lugosi to the screen as *Dracula* that same year, insisted on using actual deformed circus sideshow performers.

Freaks tells the tale of carnival "midget" Hans (Harry Earles), who falls in love with the beautiful, "normal-sized" trapeze artist Cleopatra (Olga Baclanova), a cold, heartless schemer only interested in Hans' inheritance. Though repulsed by the carnival freaks, Cleopatra pretends to befriend them to prove her love. After learning of Cleopatra's deception, however, the "freaks" exact a horrific revenge. Cleopatra's lover,

"The cuts made for the reissue of *King Kong* are revealing, as they indicate what kind of ingredients were then considered taboo," said Maltin. "Depicting a giant ape on the rampage was fine, but showing him chewing on a man—in close-up—or using his enormous foot to trample a man—again, in close-up—was not."

Though make-up techniques made great leaps over the next several decades, thanks to the Production Code, envelopes were rarely pushed.

It wasn't until the 1970s that gore once again became a ratings issue. By then the MPPDA had become the Motion Picture Association of America, and filmmakers were challenging the Hays Code with more adult fare. The MPAA knew it had to act.

Jack Valenti, appointed MPAA president in 1966, proposed a voluntary ratings system. Beginning in November 1968, an MPAA board would view each film and issue it a rating: G for general audiences, M for mature (parental discretion advised)

"Depicting a giant ape on the rampage was fine, but showing him chewing on a man ... was not." — Leonard Maltin

the Strongman (Wallace Ford), is castrated, and she is grossly disfigured: body gone from the waist down, face scarred, hands burned beyond recognition and torso tarred and feathered.

Though uncredited, this make-up effect is most likely the work of Cecil Holland, who ran MGM's make-up department at the time. Over time, this grotesque image of Cleopatra's disfigurement has become the one most closely identified with the film, and no doubt a factor in its problematic release.

A string of disastrous test screenings led MGM to believe the film was just too unsettling for audiences. Despite cutting more than 25 minutes and radically reworking the ending, the studio couldn't come up with a workable version. After only a month, *Freaks* was pulled from U.S. distribution. It was worse in the United Kingdom. The country banned it for 30 years and only allowed it to screen with an X rating in the early 1960s. Around that time, the film also experienced a renaissance in the United States. MGM had sold the rights to exploitation filmmaker/distributor Dwain Esper in 1947. *Freaks* has since become a cult horror classic—Bravo even included it in its 2004 program *100 Scariest Movie Moments*.

Gore and violence weren't even mentioned when Joseph Breen, as director of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America's Production Code Administration, put his foot down in 1934 and instituted a production code of decency for films. However, as the Hays Code, as it was widely known, was implemented and Hollywood cleaned up its act, horror films became far less gruesome.

Consider *King Kong*. Released pre-code, Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack's groundbreaking 1933 film, which includes the work of make-up supervisor Mel Berns and model maker Marcel Delgado, was a box-office smash. When the film was re-released in 1938, it didn't escape Production Code pressure.

and R, which meant no one under age 16 (increased to 17 in 1970) admitted without an accompanying parent or adult guardian. M was changed to GP and later, to PG (Parental Guidance), and a new category, PG-13 (some material may be inappropriate for children under 13) was added in 1984.

If a film went too far, it would receive an X; no one under 18 (eventually changed to 17) admitted. Initially, "adults-only" films carried none of today's stigma. They were simply films children shouldn't see. *Last Tango in Paris* and *Clockwork Orange* among them. Eventually, as the adult film industry grew in popularity, it usurped the rating: at that point, the X was so tainted, Hollywood avoided it at all costs. Changing it to NC-17 in 1990 didn't alter its scarlet-letter status.

And it didn't mean that the MPAA was going to stop using NC-17—though any film receiving it was allowed to resubmit with cuts for a softer R.

George A. Romero was the first filmmaker to test the MPAA's new limits on gore. Though *Night of the Living Dead* hit theaters a month before the new ratings system took effect, its impact on the way horror films were to be perceived in the era of the X-rating is undeniable. At the time, the genre mostly attracted kids. But a zombie army gruesomely ingesting humans was the last thing the young audience expected.

Chicago Sun Times critic Roger Ebert was so upset, he felt compelled to make it the focus of his review. "The kids in the audience were stunned," he wrote. "There was almost complete silence. The movie had stopped being delightfully scary about halfway through and had become unexpectedly terrifying. There was a little girl across the aisle from me, maybe nine years old, who was sitting very still in her seat and crying."

He was not alone in urging that children be barred from the film.

It almost seems like payback that *Dawn of the Dead*, the



General Audiences
All ages admitted
(1968-present)



Mature Audiences
Suggested for Mature Audiences
Parental Discretion Advised
(replaced by GP rating)



All Ages Admitted
Parental Guidance Suggested
(replaced by PG rating)



1931 *Freaks*



1931 *Frankenstein*



1933 *King Kong*



1994 *A Nightmare on Elm Street*



2006 *Hostel*



2006 *Saw III*

film's 1978 sequel, received an X for excessive violence. Savini isn't sure why the sequel received that rating. He doesn't feel the gore is that horrifically outrageous. "Maybe the zombie getting his head chopped off by a helicopter," he pondered, before noting the reaction it got. "The audience cheered. They wanted to see stuff like this. But they want it to happen to characters they don't like."

A major difference between the two films is that *Dawn of the Dead* is in color. The film has become notorious for its use of bright-red blood. Produced by 3M, the blood added a comic-book feel, Romero thought. It isn't known if it influenced the ratings board either way.

According to Savini, there were no conversations with Romero about cutting the film. Instead, the director defied the MPAA and released it unrated. "I think he was proud it went

out that way," Savini said. "He put that on the poster."

It was a good move. Thanks to the attention over the ratings uproar, the film grossed more than \$55 million worldwide, making it the most successful of Romero's six *Dead* movies.

Another horror film that took a similar route—*Hatchet II*—didn't fare as well. The special make-up effects in the 2010 follow-up to his 2006 horror hit are so over the top, director Adam Green was sure the MPAA would realize they were tongue-in-check and suitable for an R rating.

As Green told *ThisWeekIn Movies* in 2010, "There's nothing that's going to give anybody nightmares ... or mess them up, or offend them or sicken them. It is so ridiculous and funny. You're taking a seven-foot-long chainsaw and putting it through two guys at the same time and swinging them in the air and cutting them in half. That can't really happen."

PG

Parental Guidance Suggested
Some material may not be suitable for children
(1978-present)

PG-13

Parents Strongly Cautioned
Some material may be inappropriate
for children under 13 (1984-present)



The MPAA board felt differently. It deemed Robert Pendergraft's effects—which also featured a character getting his face shoved into an outboard motor, and a nude man being beheaded—unsuitable for children. Green said the only way the MPAA would grant *Hatchet II* an R was if all the murder scenes were removed—which he was against.

AMC came to the rescue. The theater chain was willing to go out with an unrated version of *Hatchet II* under a program promoting independent films. But when word got out, the ensuing media uproar gave AMC cold feet.

"The movie opened at midnight on 68 screens," said Green. "That night, it was pulled from the theaters in Canada. Nobody said why—just gone. That Friday night we're getting fan mail and Tweets from all over the country that were like, 'The movie's not here any more. It's gone.'"

AMC claims it pulled the film due to poor sales. Green disputes this. Much of the frustration is over what many perceive as the MPAA's arbitrary nature. A common argument for those who battle to get a rating changed is that another film did a similar gag but with much more gore.

According to Dagenais, the MPAA decisions confused director Darren Lynn Bousman. "I remember him wondering why they were so hard on one of the *Saws*, and on another, he thought there were going to be issues and there were none," he said. "I guess it really depends on who's rating that day."

If anything, the ratings board seems to have loosened up over time. Berger, whose company also works on the TV series *The Walking Dead*, points to cable TV: "I'll sit there and say, 'What the hell? We couldn't do this 10 years ago in an R feature.'"

Penman referenced the movie series he loved growing up, such as *Friday the 13th* and *Halloween*. "Watch them now and it seems like nothing," he said. "I think everybody has desensitized a bit."

Referring to his work with such classic characters as Jason, Michael Myers and Freddy Krueger as "the good old days," Berger said it was common to shoot footage that everyone knew was destined for the cutting-room floor.

Such was the case with a gag from Adam Marcus' 1993 *Jason Goes to Hell: The Final Friday*. "There's a girl and guy having sex ... Jason comes in and shows this piece of rebar through her ... splits her in half and rips it upward, like a zipper," Berger said. "I remember it being unbelievably gory and way too much. I don't think that it ended up in the movie because it became a big ratings issue."

Sometimes a filmmaker will deliberately film an over-the-top gag. The strategy is to make it so extreme, it would have to be cut, but then the director can keep a shot he really wants.

"That happened on *Casino*," Berger said. "When we shot the guy's head in the vise, we added some really gratuitous stuff. It never made it into the film, but Scorsese used it as leverage."

In these days of DVD extras, this footage now serves another purpose.

"Usually they'll do two versions," says Dagenais, referring to the *Saw* series. "They'll do a full-out version for the director's cut and a tame version for the rating board."

Unsure about how far it could go, director David Hackl shot the *Saw V* pendulum sequence several ways. "We ended up doing a final hit where we basically piled up a bunch of guts in the piece. The pendulum swung down and took them all out," he said. "I don't remember it being there when I saw the film. But I think there's a little of it in the director's cut."

"Don't expect any changes in the foreseeable future. When it comes to horror films, make-up artists will continue to reach for new heights of gore as they embrace the mantra 'Don't worry, be bloody.'"

"Generally they want as much impact as they can get," said Penman of filmmakers. "We're all on the same page."

"I think there's always room to go further," agreed Dagenais. "If they were to do another *Saw*, obviously they'll want to push the envelope."

"We want to be thrilled with what we're contributing," added Berger. "It's super important to us that we're happy with what we end up delivering at the end of the day." ■



R Restricted
Under 17 not admitted without parent or adult guardian [1970-present; during 1968-1969, the sign was 16]



X No One Under 17 Admitted
[1968-1990; replaced by NC-17 rating]



NC-17 No One 17 and Under Admitted
[1996-present; between 1990-1996, the wording was 'No Children Under 17 Admitted']