

PG-13

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Marigold Hotel,” about British re-tirees, is also PG-13, and roughly 90 percent of its audience in its American debut was 35 and older. “There is some hesitation with adults in their 40s, 50s and above about the R rating,” said Jeff Blake, vice chairman of Sony Pictures Entertainment. “Since the NC-17 rating hasn’t caught on, the R has become an incredibly broad category that ranges from one bad word to many, or from Meryl Streep smoking marijuana with Steve Martin (in 2009’s ‘It’s Complicated’) all the way up to some pretty graphic stuff.”

At the same time that the R rating is falling out of favor, the PG-13 category has stretched to include material that might have earned the more restrictive mark just a few years ago, critics of the ratings system say. “Certainly, with violence, you can get away with a lot more,” said Kevin Sandler, an associate professor at Arizona State University who specializes in movie ratings and censorship.

As the recent battle over the R rating for the independently financed documentary “Bully” illustrated, it’s not just big studios that are keen on landing PG-13s. The MPAA, which rates films, already has heard nine appeals for films scheduled for release this year, more than double the number it heard for movies that were released in 2011; six of the nine were films seeking to move from R to PG-13.

Because the MPAA’s ratings guidelines are more qualitative than quantitative, filmmakers say it’s often not clear what triggers an R rating. The MPAA itself has been second-guessing some of its own decisions, concluding that its initial ratings were “clearly erroneous” in some cases.

Two movies scheduled for release this year that were initially given R ratings for depictions of sex and teen drug and alcohol use — “The Good Doctor” and “The Perks of Being a Wallflower” — were changed to PG-13 marks on appeal without the filmmakers altering a frame. But the MPAA held firm on “Bully,” saying several expletives had to be cut to get the rating lessened. After a public relations campaign failed to sway the MPAA, the film’s distributor trimmed the offending language.

Director Steven Soderbergh said he was surprised when the MPAA gave his January espionage thriller “Haywire” an R for violence, which includes an assassination committed by a female killer. Soderbergh believes he could put an uncut version of the film on network television without altering a frame.

The filmmaker said he’s unsure whether the R rating hurt “Haywire” at the box office, but the film, despite positive reviews, grossed just \$18.9 million in domestic release.

More than a decade ago, Soderbergh was a member of a Directors Guild of America committee that tried to get the MPAA to split the R into two ratings; the idea was to create one R category for language only (for films like “The King’s Speech”) and another, more restrictive R category for films with lots of sex or violence (such as “Saw”). “The last time they made any real adjustment (to the system) was the PG-13 rating in 1984, and a lot has changed since then,” Soderbergh said.

Some industry players doubt the R rating dooms a film. “One of

the most common requests I get from distributors is, ‘What do I need to do to avoid the R?’” said Ethan Noble, a consultant who assists filmmakers and studios with the MPAA ratings and appeals process. “And what I counsel them is that it’s not always a bad thing.”

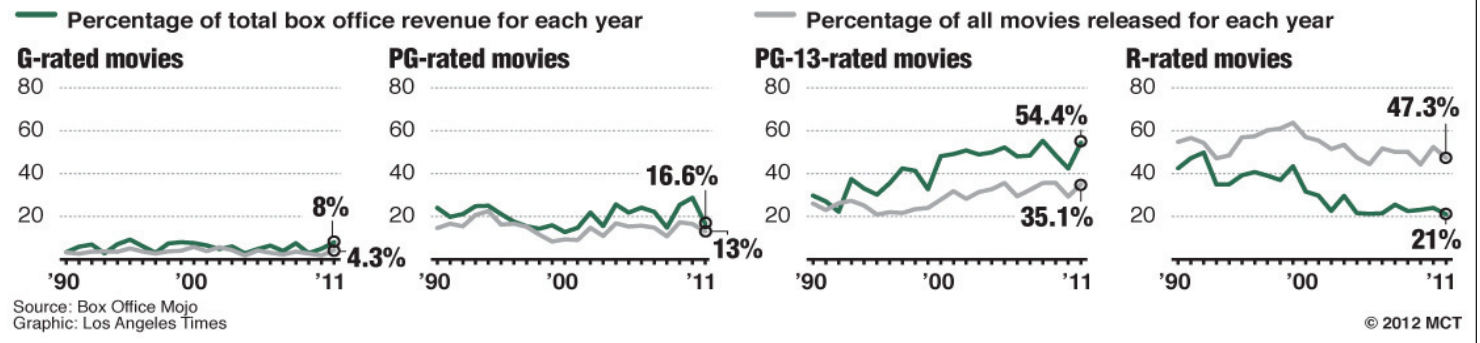
“R-rated movies can do very well,” Noble said. “It’s not this scarlet letter a lot of filmmakers fear it is.”

It can actually have a positive effect with a more limited release. “It signals to filmgoers that this is a movie for adults that should be taken seriously,” said Tom Bernard, the co-president of Sony Pictures Classics.

But Blake of Sony said that a big studio would always prefer to

The rise of PG-13

Movies rated PG-13 take in the most money at the box office, although more R-rated movies are released each year. How the ratings compare in terms of number of movies released and box-office revenue:



push the limit on the less restrictive PG-13 rating than deal with the R, which can indicate mate-

rial as varied as bad language and extreme violence. “When you do have an R rat-

ing, you need to give some more explanation (to the moviegoer) about what it is,” he said. “Be-

cause these days, it could be anything.”

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Carson

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who faced his wrath. One of those was Joan Rivers, who served as “The Tonight Show’s” guest host for three years and later headed up her own talk show on Fox. “Joan Rivers was Johnny’s pride and joy,” says Jones.

“And besides the marriages, I don’t think he was any more devastated than he was when (Rivers struck out on her own) ... and Joan finally in this documentary, she acknowledges it. She didn’t tell him well in advance about her negotiations for her Fox show. He found out about it from another source.

“She called him, and he did hang up on her and never spoke to her again. And she says in the film, she says, ‘You know, now that I think about it, I should have told him sooner. I should have told him sooner.’ That broke his heart. The whole thing with Joan Rivers broke Johnny’s heart. It really did.”

Jay Leno inherited “The Tonight Show.” But it was David Letterman that Carson befriended, says Jones. “Johnny really loved David Letterman. And Bob Wright, the former head of NBC, in the film, talks about how Johnny did express to him his wish that David would be a great host. And that comes out in our film. He didn’t have anything against Jay Leno, but I think he really took David under his wing.”

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