Topics

Pictorial License

The PG Paradox

President Carter sounded like many other parents when he complained the other day that only motion pictures made in the 1950's were suitable for his 11-year-old daughter Amy. To some, the President's concern may seem to reflect pious, small-town rigor, but such sneers are unwarranted. It is a hard commercial fact that films made for an unrestricted audience earn a "G" rating, which has come to be regarded as box-office poison. Adult audiences will stay away in droves from movies thus labeled as kid stuff. Hence producers will deliberately add a touch of profanity or a flash of flesh to obtain the more desirable "PG" rating in which parental guidance is suggested.

This is an unforeseen irony in the rating system that the motion picture industry initiated in 1968. Of the 5,000 pictures that carry ratings, about 16 percent are graded "G" and 37 percent are rated "PG." But of the films rated this year, only 4 percent are "G" and 41 percent are "PG." The "G" movie, in short, is already an endangered species.

The ratings system does provide a generally understood yardstick. And there does seem to be a widespread yearning for the 1950's good-guy, bad-guy film in which role models are not anti-heroes. A case in point is "Star Wars," with its blend of space cowboys and a yellow-brick-road quest from the Wizard of Oz. It is nevertheless worth noting that even "Star Wars" was rated PG.

Mug Shots

With Governor Carey's approval, mug shots will be required on all New York State drivers' licenses. Joining 42 other states, New York will use the photos to help combat bad checks and fraudulent identifications. Progress has its price: it will cost you $5.50 to renew your license instead of $4.

The sealed plastic card will represent a plunge into modernity, and modernity has not exactly had a stranglehold on the Department of Motor Vehicles. The department is, in fact, one of the last bureaucracies of a nostalgic, handicraft era.

As anyone knows who has applied there for a license, the New York City office is a breathtaking mix of the archaic and the up-to-date. Handwritten papers are still hand-stamped and hand-transported by cardboard box, and Smithsonian-style eye charts hang on back walls. Queues that follow neither logic nor geometry cluster around scarred wooden benches and old folding chairs. The ambience is rummage sale, and names are shouted amiably into the chaos or spelled out until the applicant snaps alert. Eventually everyone advances to a locked booth (which looks as if it came from some subway platform) where dollar bills and licenses are shoved through as the clerk chants the regulations over and over, like a muezzin.

In the midst of all this drab eccentricity, the written drivers' test is a computerized marvel — with full color illustrations of the latest cars — that not only tells you instantly when you've made a mistake but also tells you what you should have said, or punched.

We doubt that a few cameras will overwhelm the rummage-sale atmosphere. But they could, if the department is bold, put an end to the ridiculously long strings of numerals that now identify New York drivers. Since the driver's license often seems to be the only tangible and acceptable proof of being, those numbers must be painstakingly copied every time a person cashes a check. Mug shots will hardly satisfy vanity, but let them at least conserve time and tempers.