

VIDEO VIEWING

By Dan Greenberg
special writer

The controversy that swept through the motion picture business last summer with a half dozen films receiving an X rating from the MPAA Ratings Council has had a different impact on the home video market.

Distributors of films like "Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down!" "Henry, Portrait of a Serial Killer," "Henry and June," "The Cook, The Thief..." and several others rejected X ratings and chose to market their merchandise as "unrated."

Theaters that would not or could not screen X-rated films had no problem with unrated motion pictures. The ensuing brouhaha led to the establishment of the NC-17 designation, no children under 17 admitted.

Videotape distributors, of course, are not bound by the constraints of theatrical distribution and have long used MPAA ratings while distributing "uncut" versions side-by-side with R-rated films. Use of NC-17 varies with some waiting to see how attitudes evolve while others are leaping right in, knowing quite well that sensationalism sells.

There's a hypocritical view in our culture that it's OK to expose children to violence but not to sexuality and the NC-17 rating is supposed to deal with that by signifying serious, mature topics considered inappropriate for the younger set without stigmatizing them with an X, long considered the hallmark of pornography.

IF THAT'S THE case then RCA/Columbia Pictures Home Video made the correct decision in publishing its distribution of Pedro Almodovar's "Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown" ("Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down") (1990, color, 105 minutes, in Spanish with English subtitles) as an NC-17, the rating the film ultimately received after rejecting an X.

Clearly, the film is explicit and toys with everyone's sensibilities but not for pornographic purposes. The rating is appropriate but that is not to be construed as advertising sensationalism. In "Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down" Almodovar uses the explicit as well as the farcical to say a lot of interesting things about humanity.

Ricky (Antonio Banderas) is the classic outsider — orphaned at three, juvenile home at eight, mental asylum as a teenager. As the film opens he is released as cured according to the court order that is his ticket to freedom.

Ricky has a way with the ladies but is obsessed with Marina (Victoria Abril), a reformed junkie and porno star who is appearing in a horror film directed by Maximo. Her sister, Lola, is the film's line producer.

Maximo, a great film director in the classic European tradition, is confined to a wheelchair since his recent stroke. This horror film within the film is his comeback but destined to be his last. His passion for Marina masks his reluctance to complete the film.

BUT MAXIMO'S ardor for Marina pales in comparison to Ricky's who stalks Marina on the set of the horror film in an extremely effective sequence commenting on illusion and reality in our lives — what is real and how do we know we're not being fooled by someone who has a

bill of goods to sell? Ricky kidnaps Marina in her own apartment and announces that eventually she will love him, they will marry and have children. Pretty cheeky, don't you think? While it may sound bizarre, Almodovar's direction creates excitement and tension.

Although captivity is threatening and unpleasant, Ricky is sincere and does try to please Marina. But the film's title and style telegraphs that eventually Ricky will prevail. When he does, unfortunately, Marina's transition from captive to lover is much too abrupt and doesn't fit the film's realistic style.

Aside from the glitch, "Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down" is an excellent film alternating violence, humor and compassion quite effectively. Its well-taken commentary on the hell people can do to each other for themselves is one significant point Almodovar makes.

BUT HIS MOST important concept relates to the ways in which we are imprisoned within ourselves and within our own homes. That we enjoy that captivity is an even more telling irony.

"Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down" on cassette is an opportunity to view an exceptional film that didn't last very long at the theaters.

Catching up on video releases this month, MGM/UA Home Video released three new cassettes earlier this month including Bob Hope in "The Road to Hong Kong" (1962, black and white, no rating, 91 minutes). The first "Road" picture in 10 years, this was the last of that series. It features Bob and Bing as well as Dorothy Lamour, Joan Collins and Peter Sellers.

"The Long, Long Trailer" (1954, color, no rating, 103 minutes) stars Lucy and Desi along with Marjorie Main and Keenan Wynn in a humorous honeymoon story with a trailer that won't quit. Surprisingly, the Peter O'Toole-Peter Sellers-Woody Allen vehicle, "What's New Pussycat?" (1965, color, no rating, 105 minutes) is appearing for the first time on video cassette. This was Woody Allen's film acting and writing debut. The title song was nominated for an Oscar and the movie features Romy Schneider, Capucine, Paula Prentiss and Ursula Andress.

Four classic gangster films are available for the first time on home video from CBS/Fox. "House of Strangers" (1949, black and white, no rating, 101 minutes) stars Edward G. Robinson, Richard Conte, Luther Adler and Susan Hayward in a story of a ruthless financier who uses his four sons to further his schemes.

"KISS OF DEATH" (1947, black and white, no rating, 98 minutes) also has an all-star cast with Richard Widmark in his first role. Victor Mature is a thief and Brian Donlevy is the D.A.

Nominated for two Oscars, "Panic in the Streets" (1950, black and white, no rating, 93 minutes) also stars Richard Widmark along with Barbara Bel Geddes, Jack Palance, Zero Mostel and Paul Douglas. The screenplay for this story of the New Orleans waterfront won an Oscar.

Finally, for viewers with a big appetite for old gangster films, "Seven Thieves" (1960, black and white, no rating, 102 minutes) features Edward G. Robinson as the master criminal in the international crime scene with Joan Collins, Eli Wallach and Rod Steiger helping him out.



The first film to receive the controversial NC-17 rating is the story of writer Henry Miller (Fred Ward) and his bizarre relationship with his wife (Uma Thurmond).

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