'Red-band' Web trailers show all the nasty bits

By Robert W. Welkos, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
October 26, 2007

IN one trailer for "No Country for Old Men," the Coen brothers' tale of murder and mayhem near the Rio Grande, a driver is pulled over by a police car on a stretch of desolate highway and has his brains blown away by a man holding an oxygen tank and nozzle, which he places to the man's forehead.

In a trailer for "Beowulf," director Robert Zemeckis' cinematic vision of the classic Anglo-Saxon poem done in the same motion-capture technique that he used in "The Polar Express," we see sexy images of a voluptuous and naked-looking Grendel's mother, played by Angelina Jolie, rising seductively from the water.

Neither are likely to surface at the multiplex because of the Motion Picture Assn. of America ratings system, in which scenes such as these are toned down for general audiences in so-called green-band trailers.

But increasingly, more uncensored versions, referred to as "red-band" trailers, are popping up on the Internet, with studios using them as a marketing tool to reach older audiences not as likely to be offended by super-violence, sex or use of the "F" word. In the process, the more provocative trailers allow them to telegraph to moviegoers the edgier content of their films.

"It is the only way to give the target audience a true sampling of what the film is all about," said Adam Fogelson, president of marketing and distribution at Universal Pictures. He noted that with red-band trailers,
audiences can more accurately judge for themselves the content of adult-oriented, R-rated comedies such as producer-director Judd Apatow's "Knocked Up" and "The 40-Year-Old Virgin," which became big hits.

"Those films were made to be R-rated," Fogelson said. "They didn't accidentally slip into an R-rating... I think Judd's audience has come to expect they can find a true representation of the film online."

But Fogelson said the studios have been having a difficult time persuading theater owners, who still prefer the sanitized versions, to run the red-band trailers.

"Long ago, those trailers did have a real and meaningful life in theaters... but over the last five to 10 years, they've slowly been almost entirely removed from an opportunity to be seen there," he said, noting that 1999's high school comedy "American Pie" used R-rated trailers in theaters.

But the theater owners are faced with a dilemma: Do they run trailers that contain gore, for example, before an R-rated comedy such as "Knocked Up?"

The National Assn. of Theater Owners, which represents 20,000 screens in the U.S., will only note that it permits its members to decide for themselves whether to run red-band trailers.

The MPAA refers to red-band trailers as "red-tag" trailers because instead of carrying a red band, as trailers once did, they now contain a tag that goes on front. Whatever they're called, they are more restricted, as to who is allowed to see them, than the green-band or "green-tag" trailers used for all audiences. Under the R rating, children under 17 are not allowed to attend unless accompanied by a parent or adult guardian.

For the MPAA's part, it wants to ensure that adult-oriented marketing materials don't wind up being viewed by children.

"The trailers allow us to protect children by allowing the companies to have the flexibility to market their movies, but we're still protecting children from not seeing inappropriate material," said Marilyn Gordon, senior vice president of advertising for the MPAA. She noted that each year the MPAA's advertising administration reviews 51,000 to 60,000 pieces of advertising, including trailers. This year, about "11 or 12" films have used red-tag trailers, she pointed out. Among the recent films that have used them are Columbia Pictures' "Superbad" and 20th Century Fox's upcoming sci-fi thriller "Aliens vs. Predator: Requiem." "We monitor all the advertising," Gordon said. "We have great partnerships with the companies that submit their advertising, and I think we have a very effective system in doing that."

Though red-band trailers usually go with R-rated films, they don't have to. Consider "Beowulf." It has a PG-13 rating, but Paramount Pictures, which is releasing the film in the U.S., is running a restricted trailer to highlight some of the movie's edgier elements. To be sure, Angelina Jolie is not going to be nude in the movie, but the restricted trailer allows the studio to highlight the sexiness of her character in ways it couldn't in a green-band trailer.

Meanwhile, the MPAA in July implemented a new age-appropriate "yellow-tag" trailer, which is more targeted in its approach and does not contain as much violence or sexually graphic material as red-band trailers.

Currently, the yellow-tag trailers are used only on the Internet but studios, and theater owners are in discussions on whether they are appropriate for use in theaters. To date, only a few films have used them, among them Rob Zombie's "Halloween."

When using red-band trailers, studios must be choosy in selecting websites where the trailers run, and also must establish "age gates," in which users are asked to fill out age-verification forms.
Chris Thilk, a Chicago-based writer who blogs at www.moviemarketingmadness.com, thinks red-band trailers do something their PG brethren couldn't really do: accurately sell the movie to its intended audience.

Each red-band trailer, he writes on his blog, becomes a hot topic in the film blog world -- the "equivalent of sneaking a Playboy into junior high homeroom."

He thinks the wave of red-band trailers is a good thing for audiences. "If you've got an R-rated movie and you're creating a PG-rated trailer," he told The Times in a phone interview, "I'm not going to say you're misrepresenting the film, but you're certainly watering it down."

The red-band trailer for "No Country for Old Men," he noted, shows fans that the Coen brothers are returning to the cinematic style of some of their earlier films such as "Blood Simple" and "Fargo."

"Their reputation was built on these super-violent films," Thilk said. "Their last few films, like 'Intolerable Cruelty,' were much more slapsticky. Now, you have them back in the very ethically questionable, violent, character films. To have a trailer that accurately portrays that... I can actually see based on this trailer that the Coen brothers are making another film like this."

Michael A. Vorhaus, managing director of Frank N. Magid Associates, a Sherman Oaks-based media consumer research and consulting firm that advises studios, exhibitors and TV stations on advertising, said one drawback he sees in red-band trailers is that studios usually want "huge tonnage" in Internet viewership when they post their trailers on Yahoo or MySpace, so it may not be as advantageous to show age-verified trailers on smaller websites.

"If they are doing age verification for one trailer, fine, but I think they will get a lot of people who say, 'No way' not because they're not old enough to see it, but because who needs another form? Every time you have to click through another page, or fill out another form, you lose a number of [users]."

robert.welkos@latimes.com