Hollywood on the offensive

By Hiawatha Bray, Globe Staff, 8/19/2002

This column is a fully integrated aesthetic experience, and must be read in its entirety. No skimming or skipping around. Read it all. Every word.

Otherwise you’ll hurt my feelings, and I’ll begin grumbling like the people at the Directors Guild of America, the organization of Hollywood film directors. Martha Coolidge, president of the guild, is outraged by a variety of companies that allow consumers to view films with the naughty bits excised. Sex scenes, cuss words, guys getting limbs blown off - that kind of thing.

Like music recording companies enraged by illicit Internet file-swapping, Coolidge and her group want to dictate to consumers how movies should be used. But with a new generation of digital video-filtering products coming to market, Coolidge will probably have as much success as the music moguls, which is to say none at all.

Not that she doesn’t have a point. Coolidge argues that a film’s seamy stuff is part of the director’s artistic vision and should be left intact.

‘‘When the viewer is not seeing the movie the way it was meant to be seen,’’ says Coolidge, ‘‘you’re missing part of the movie.’’

But some moviegoers don’t want to see naked flesh or hear God’s name taken in vain, even for the sake of art. Hollywood has always catered to this market, issuing tamer versions of hit films for showing on TV or in airplanes. But there are also companies like Clean Flicks of Pleasant Grove, Utah, which sells ‘‘family-friendly’’ videos purged of sex, violence, and foul language.

Coolidge would love to see the Hollywood studios unleash their lawyers on these video companies. If they do, the studios could well prevail. Clean Flicks and its ilk are altering copyrighted material, then reselling it for a profit. That doesn’t sound right.

But there’s more than one way to edit a movie. For instance, some people fast-forward to skip over the nasty bits. Why not have the TV or video player do this automatically?

A small but growing group of consumers is choosing exactly that option, by purchasing equipment that edits offensive material on the fly. Arkansas-based Principle Solutions Inc. sells a $100 box called TVGuardian (www.tvguardian.com) that detects the closed-caption datastream embedded in most broadcast TV shows and videos. Then it automatically bleeps out the four-letter words.

‘‘We’ve had a little bit of hate mail from Hollywood insiders about what we’re doing with their programs,’’ says company president Mike Seals, who seems to be losing no sleep over it. The TVGuardian technology has been licensed by Japanese electronics maker Sanyo, which is now...
building it into some of its VCRs and DVD players.

To filter images as well as words requires far more sophistication than today’s computers can manage. So companies like Family Shield Technologies LLC of Greeley, Colo., use human reviewers to watch dozens of movies and produce a digital template that identifies, down to the split-second, every cuss word, blood splatter, or bare midriff in the movie. This database is then downloaded from the Internet and plugged into the company’s $249 MovieShield filtering device, a box that sits between the TV and the video player. When you run a movie that’s included in the database, the objectionable parts are deleted.

MovieShield (www.movieshield.com) went on sale a couple of months ago, says sales director Richard Schmer. And even at its rather stiff price, a thousand copies have been sold to conservative families desperate to watch something besides Disney movies.

Says Schmer: ‘’The response we’ve gotten is ... ‘Where have you guys been?’’

The simplest solution, ClearPlay (www.clearplay.com), is a software-only product for Windows machines with built-in DVD players. It works on the same principle as MovieShield. A $9.95 monthly membership entitles you to download filter templates for dozens of recent movies. You can play them on your PC, but ClearPlay says most of its customers use a ’’video-out’’ connector on the computer to pump filtered movies to the living room TV.

The new technology drives Coolidge and her colleagues crazy. ’’I can tell you that directors are extremely upset,’’ she says, and they’re mulling a variety of responses, including possible legal action.

Fat chance. Unlike the video retailer Clean Flicks, these digital filters don’t make any changes to the original movie, so there’s no question of copyright violation. And even Coolidge admits: ’’What people do in the privacy of their own home is strictly up to them.’’

Just so. If consenting adults, behind closed doors, want their DVD players to skip the gratuitous sex scene, it’s none of Coolidge’s business, or anybody else’s. Her art ends where our picture tubes begin.

Hiawatha Bray can be reached at bray@globe.com.