History 339

MOTION PICTURE CENSORSHIP IN THE UNITED STATES

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1:30 to 2:20 p.m. Mondays and Wednesdays, Fall Semester, 2009

Four Credit Hours

Office Hours (Rice 305): MWF 12 to 1 and MW 2:30 to 3:15
And by appointment

The Five-Cent Movie House, 1917
This theater on Third Avenue in New York boasts "practically a two-hour show." Photo from The New York Times Photo Archives. NSAPMI2
“Harney led Charity to a glittering place – everything she saw seemed to glitter – where they passed, between immense pictures of yellow-haired beauties stabbing villains in evening dress, into a velvet-curtained auditorium packed with spectators to the last limit of compression. After that, for a while, everything was merged in her brain in swimming circles of heat and blinding alternations of light and darkness. All the world has to show seemed to pass before her in a chaos of palms and minarets, charging cavalry regiments, roaring lions, comic policemen and scowling murderers; and the crowd around, the hundreds of hot sallov candy-munching faces, young, old, middle-aged, but all kindled with the same contagious excitement, became part of the spectacle, and danced on the screen with the rest.”

☐ Edith Wharton, *Summer* (published 1917), describing the visit of Charity Royall, from a provincial town in Massachusetts, to her first movie theater

Motion pictures represent “an entirely new esthetic development, a new form of true beauty in the turmoil of a technical age, created by its very technique and yet more than any other art destined to overcome outer nature by the free and joyful play of the mind.”


Censorship should be seen “as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression.”


From the moment the first crude nickelodeons flickered across their tiny screens, the movies have been a site where cultural regulation has been vigorously contested. This course examines the shifting cultural and political terrain of movie censorship, from early films to the present. We examine early movements to control the movies, focusing in particular on the regime of cultural regulation established by Hollywood’s Production Code Administration, survey the gradual and inelegant demise of the PCA, and reflect on the cross-currents of the present-day ratings system. Throughout the course we attempt to understand who wants censorship and why, what the results have been for works of the imagination, and how motion picture censorship fits into broader historical issues of the control of expression. The course attempts to place American movie censorship in a broader context than it is usually treated – specifically, to introduce some international comparisons and to consider film censorship in juxtaposition with censorship in other media. The course introduces a range of recent scholarship and encourages the development of independent judgments about the social construction of censorship and its effects on freedom of expression.
In addition to the class sessions there will be group screenings of films on some Sundays; you are strongly encouraged to attend. The movies are an indispensable part of the course, and seeing them in a group enhances the experience. If you can't make the Sunday screenings, be sure you see the films (on reserve) at another time.

Reading assignments other than the required texts are on ERES; some are also available in hard copy on Reserve. I rely on articles and book chapters both because it's a way to cover the essence of the increasingly complicated scholarship on this subject and because I don't find any one book on the Production Code Administration to be entirely satisfactory.

There are four writing assignments. The first three are synthetic essays of approximately six pages in length; in each you analyze the readings, films, and discussions to that point in the class. The final project (up to ten pages) aims at a synthesis of the issues surrounding movie censorship. For the final project you may either write an essay that attempts to synthesize the evolution of American movie censorship or you may do a research-based paper with a more specific focus. You might compare a literary text with its Hollywood treatment; Streetcar Named Desire, Tea and Sympathy, and Anna Karenina make potent subjects. You might focus on the work of a particular personality; three films by Mae West – She Done Him Wrong, I'm No Angel, and Belle of the Nineties -- show her evolution under the increasingly watchful eye of Hollywood censors. I'm happy to discuss other topics with you. The first essay will be graded pass/no pass. The second and third essays and the final project each count one-third of the final grade.

Active participation in discussion, based on careful reading and analysis, is essential. Class participation will influence borderline grades.

Required texts


Aug. 31 Introduction

Sept. 2 Censorship: Theoretical and Historical Issues

Lee Grievson, Policing Cinema, introduction and chap. 1
Annabel Patterson, Censorship and Interpretation: The Conditions of Writing And Reading in Early Modern England (1991), “introduction,” 3-31
Ruth Gavison, “Incitement and the Limits of Law,” pp 43-45
Sept. 7  No Class – Labor Day

Sept. 9  “I know it when I see it”: The Lovers, Obscenity, and the Constitution

The showing of Louis Malle’s Les Amants at the Heights Arts Theater in Cleveland Heights in 1959 set in motion a chain of events that led to a landmark Supreme Court ruling on obscenity and freedom of expression in the movies. Nico Jacobellis, the exhibitor, was arrested for showing an allegedly obscene movie. His case, promoted by the American Civil Liberties Union, wound its way to the Supreme Court, which finally ruled in 1964 that the picture was not obscene (Jacobellis v. Ohio, 1964). The case is best known for Justice Potter Stewart’s deathless pronouncement: “I know it [obscenity] when I see it and this is not it.” While Stewart’s imprecise constitutional standard is forever associated with the case, the justices issued several opinions, which encapsulate the range of views on what’s permissible in the cinema. The fiftieth anniversary of the unfortunate Mr. Jacobellis’ arrest is an appropriate moment to reflect on the enduring arguments about movie censorship and how they are reflected in divergent views about forms of expression permitted under the constitution.

Screen Les Amants (on reserve) and read the several Supreme Court opinions in the Jacobellis case.

Sept. 14  Regulating Early Movies

Jane Addams, “The House of Dreams” from The Spirit of Youth and the City Streets (1909) (handout)
Sarah J. Smith, Children, Cinema & Censorship: From Dracula to the Dead End Kids (2005), 18-44
John H. Houchin, Censorship of the American Theatre in the Twentieth Century [2003], Pages TBA
David Thomas, David Carlton, and Anne Etienne, Theatre Censorship: From Walpole to Wilson, chap. 3

Sept. 16  Movie Censorship and the First Amendment

Mutual v. Ohio (1915)
Grieveson, chap. 5 and conclusion
David Rabban, Free Speech in Its Forgotten Years (1997), 173-176
Sept. 20 (Sunday, 7 p.m.) Screening of pre-code pictures from “Forbidden Hollywood”

Sept. 21, 23 Sound and the Depression: Hollywood at the Edge of Cultural Consensus

Lea Jacobs, *The Wages of Sin*, intro and chap. 1
Alison M. Parker, *Purifying America: Women, Cultural Reform, and Pro-Censorship Activism, 1873-1933* (1997), 134-157

Sept. 28 No Class – Yom Kippur

Sept. 30 *First Essay Due at Class Time*

Sept. 30 The Production Code

The production code (handout)

Oct. 4 (Sunday 7 p.m.) *Screening of Blonde Venus (Marlene Dietrich, 1932)*

Oct. 5 The Evolution of Movie Censorship

Maltby, “‘To Prevent the Prevalent Type of Book’: Censorship and Adaptation in Hollywood, 1924-1934,” in Couvares, ed., *Movie Censorship and American Culture*, 97-128 (recommended)
Leonard Leff & Jerold Simmons, *The Dames in the Kimono: Hollywood, Censorship, And the Production Code from the 1920s to the 1960s* (1990), preface, chaps. 1-3 (recommended)

Oct. 7 No Class

Oct. 12 Screening of *I’m No Angel (Mae West 1934)* – Class begins at 1 p.m.

Oct. 14 The Production Code Administration Takes Charge

Jacobs, chaps. 2-4
Mary Beth Hamilton, *When I’m Bad I’m Better: Mae West, Sex, and American
Entertainment (1997), 194-217
Leff & Simmons, Dame in the Kimono, chaps. 4-6 (recommended)

Oct. 16 (Friday) Second Essay Due at 12 Noon

Oct. 19, 21 No Class -- Fall Break

Oct. 26 The PCA Crackdown

Henry James Forman, Our Movie-Made Children (1933), selections
Jacobs, chaps. 5-7
Leff & Simmons, chap. 5 (recommended)

Oct. 28 The PCA Crackdown (continued)

Jacobs, chaps. 5-7
Leff & Simmons, chap. 5 (recommended)

Nov. 1 (Sunday, 7 p.m.) Screening of Anna Karenina (Greta Garbo, 1935)

Nov. 2 The PCA’s Exhibit A: Anna Karenina

Nov. 4 After Anna: What Is Censorship?

Nov. 9 Film Noir Undermines the Code

Sheri Chinen Biesen, Blackout: World War II and the Origins of Film Noir (2005), 96-123.
Boyer, "The Thirties," in Purity in Print, 244-269

Billy Wilder’s Double Indemnity (1945) or The Postman Always Rings Twice (1945)

Nov. 11 No Class

Nov. 15 (Sunday, 7 p.m.) Screening of Streetcar Named Desire (Marlon Brando, 1951)

We’ll view the original release version, as well as some of the major portions of the director’s cut that were excised.

Nov. 16 “It began with Streetcar”

Elia Kazan, Kazan on Directing (2009), 156-64.
Nov. 18 From Mutual to Miracle: The Changing Constitutional Climate

William Bruce Johnson, *Miracles & Sacrilege: Roberto Rossellini, the Church, and Film Censorship in Hollywood* (2008), 322-333
Leff & Simmons, chaps. 9-11 and “aftermath” (recommended)

Nov. 22 (Sunday 7 p.m.) Screening of *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* [Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, 1966]

Nov. 23 Third Essay Due at Class Time

Nov. 23 Hollywood on the Brink of Revolution

Black, *The Catholic Crusade Against the Movies* [1997], chap. 5

Nov. 25 No Class – Thanksgiving Week

Nov. 30 The Ratings System

Vaughn, *Freedom and Entertainment*, intro and chaps. 1-4

Dec. 2 Ratings, II

Dec. 6 (Sunday 7 p.m.) Screening of Kirby Dick’s documentary *This Film Is Not Yet Rated*

Dec. 7 Censorship, Collaboration, and Democracy

Vaughn, chaps. 5-10
Review readings from Sept. 2

Dec. 9 Conclusion: A Century of Movie Censorship

Dec. 18 Final Project Due at 10 a.m.