“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 sallow 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’ place in the national cultural consensus 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.

We’ll screen some films in class, starting at 1 p.m. A couple of screenings are also scheduled for Sunday afternoon or evening (time to be determined in consultation with the class). Since movie-going before video and Netflix was a group experience, it’s useful to recapture that experience — plus, it’s fun. So please make every effort to be a part of those screenings. If you can’t attend those screenings, please be sure to check out the films from Reserve and view them at your leisure.

The required texts are available in hard copy on Reserve. Reading assignments other than the required texts are on ERES; some are also available in hard copy on Reserve. In some weeks when the reading assignment is heavy, I’ll divide the class into two, with each group reading part of the selections and reporting on them to the class.

There are four writing assignments. The first three are synthetic, interpretive essays of approximately six to eight pages in length; in each you analyze the readings, films, and discussions to that point in the class. The final project (ten to twelve pages) asks you to apply a perspective on movie censorship to a specific subject in depth. 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, Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf,* 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. All writing is governed by Oberlin’s honor code.

Every reasonable effort will be made to accommodate students with disabilities.

Active participation in discussion, based on careful reading and analysis, is essential for the colloquium’s success. Class participation will be taken into account in resolving borderline grades.
Required texts


Feb. 7 Introduction: What Is Censorship?

Feb. 9 Censorship: The New Scholarship

    Lee Grieveson, *Policing Cinema*, introduction and chap. 1

Feb. 14 “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.” 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. Justice William Brennan’s attempt to enunciate a national standard is particularly important. The range of opinions the justices expressed encapsulate some of the key positions on what may be forms of expression permitted under the Constitution and how those standards might be determined.

Screen *Les Amants* (on reserve) – make it a party with classmates -- and read the several Supreme Court opinions in the Jacobellis case (on reserve).

Feb. 16 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], Chap. 2.
David Thomas, David Carlton, and Anne Etienne, Theatre Censorship: From Walpole to Wilson, chap. 3.

Feb. 21  But What About the First Amendment?

Mutual v. Ohio (1915)
David Rabban, Free Speech in Its Forgotten Years (1997), 173-176

Feb. 23, 1 p.m.  Screening of pre-code pictures from “Forbidden Hollywood”

Feb. 25, noon  FIRST ESSAY DUE

Feb. 28, March 2  Sound and the Depression: Hollywood at the Edge of Cultural Consensus

Lea Jacobs, The Wages of Sin, intro and chap. 1
Leigh Wheeler, Against Obscenity: Reform and the Politics of Womanhood (2004), 46-72
Alison M. Parker, Purifying America: Women, Cultural Reform, and Pro-Censorship Activism, 1873-1933 (1997), 134-157
Houchin, Censorship of the American Theatre, chap. 3.

March 7, 1 p.m.  Screening of Blonde Venus (Marlene Dietrich, 1932)

March 9  Production Codes

Handouts:

T.P. O’Connor’s 43 Rules of the BBFC (1917)
BBFC Modified Grounds for Censorship (1926)
“Don’ts and Be Carefuls” (1927)

The Production Code (1930)

March 14, 16  The Evolution of Movie Censorship


Maltby, “‘To Prevent the Prevalent Type of Book’: Censorship and Adapation in Hollywood, 1924-1934,” in Couvares, ed., *Movie Censorship and American Culture*, 97-128 (recommended)

Leonard Leff & Jerold Simmons, *The Dame in the Kimono: Hollywood, Censorship, And the Production Code from the 1920s to the 1960s* (1990), preface, chaps. 1-3 (recommended)

March 21, 1 p.m.  **Screening of *I'm No Angel (Mae West, 1934)***

Mary Beth Hamilton, *When I'm Bad I'm Better: Mae West, Sex, and American Entertainment* (1997), 194-217

March 25, noon  **Second Essay Due**

March 28, 30  **No Class – Spring Break**

April 4, 6  **The Production Code Administration Takes Charge**

Jacobs, chaps. 2-7


Houchin, *Censorship of the American Theatre*, pp. 117-154

Henry James Forman, *Our Movie-Made Children* (1933), selections TBA

Smith, *Children, Cinema & Censorship*, chap. 5

Leff & Simmons, *Dame in the Kimono*, chaps. 4-6 (recommended)

April 11, 1 p.m.  **Screening of *Anna Karenina* (Greta Garbo, 1935)**

April 13  **After *Anna*: What Is Censorship?**

Review Jacobs on Anna

April 17 (Sunday)  **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.

April 18  **“It began with Streetcar”: Censorship, Morality, and Taste**

Elia Kazan, *Kazan on Directing* (2009), 156-64.
April 20       No Class

April 22, noon  Third Essay Due

April 25       From Mutual to Miracle: The Changing Cultural and Constitutional Climate

Doherty, Hollywood’s Censor, 292-312
Laura Wittern-Keller, Freedom of the Screen: Legal Challenges to State Film Censorship, 1915-1981 (2008), 107-147
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)

April 27       Hollywood on the Brink of Revolution

Black, The Catholic Crusade Against the Movies (1997), chap. 5
Mark Harris, Pictures at a Revolution: Five Movies and the Birth of the New Hollywood (2008), 207-216, 337-347

May 1 (Sunday) Screening of Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? (Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, 1966)

May 2       The Ratings System

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

May 4, 1 p.m. Screening of Kirby Dick’s documentary This Film Is Not Yet Rated

May 9       Censorship, Collaboration, and Democracy

Vaughn, chaps. 5-10
Review readings from Feb. 9

May 11       Conclusion: A Century of Movie Censorship

Final Project Due at time of final exam

1.31.11