“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.”

“The real instrument of censorship is not the police, it is the endoxa. Just as a language is better defined by what it forbids to be said (its rhetorical rules), so social censorship exists not where speech is prevented but where it is compulsory. The most profound type of subversion (counter-censorship) does not, then, necessarily consist in saying what shocks public opinion, morality, the law, or the police, but in inventing a discourse that is paradoxical (pure of any doxa): invention (and not provocation) is a revolutionary act: the latter cannot be accomplished except by founding a new language.” Roland Barthes, *Sade, Fourier, Loyola* (1971), translated by Nicholas Harrison, *Circles of Censorship: Censorship and Its Metaphors in French History, Literature, and Theory* (1995)

**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 American movie censorship, from early films to 1968. (The movie industry replaced its in-house censorship agency, the Production Code Administration, with the ratings system in 1968, which continues today.) Throughout the course we attempt to understand who wanted 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.**

The required text is 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.

On days when we are viewing films, class will start at 1 p.m. (and in one case at 12 noon).

Grading is as follows:

1. Three longer writing assignments, each of which counts 20 percent of the final grade. The first two are synthetic, interpretive essays of approximately six to eight pages in length. For the final project (ten to twelve pages) 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. I’m happy to discuss topics with you.

2. Eight response papers, each about a page in length. Response papers count a total of 20 per cent of the final grade. You will write a response paper once a week, to be handed in at classtime on Mondays or Wednesdays, in the first four weeks of the term. You will then write a response paper, to be handed in on Wednesdays, on the four films we screen in April.
3. Class participation, which counts 20 percent of the final grade. I'll discuss your class participation with you individually midway through the course.

All work in the class is governed by Oberlin’s honor code.

Every reasonable effort will be made to accommodate students with disabilities. Please discuss with me any concerns you have in this area.

Active participation in discussion, based on careful reading and analysis, is essential for the colloquium’s success. Please come to class being prepared to articulate the arguments you encounter in the readings in a concise, clearly structured manner. Robert Heinlein, the science fiction writer, said: “I never learned anything from anybody I agreed with.” We should all expect to learn a lot!

Required text


I. CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON CENSORSHIP

Feb. 6 Introduction: What Is Censorship?

Annabel Patterson, “Censorship,” in Martin Coyle, ed., Encyclopedia of Literature and Criticism (1990), Ref. PR85.E49 (use in library)

Feb. 8 New Scholarly Perspectives


Feb. 13 Censorship and Early Modern British Literature: Implications for The Movies

Annabel Patterson, Censorship and Interpretation: The Conditions of Writing And Reading in Early Modern England (1991), “introduction,” 3-31
Feb. 15  
**Regulating Early Movies: The Argument**

Jane Addams, “The House of Dreams” from *The Spirit of Youth and the City Streets* (1909) (handout)

Feb. 20  
**Regulating Movies in the US, UK, and Imperial Germany**

Sarah J. Smith, *Children, Cinema & Censorship: From Dracula to the Dead End Kids* (2005), 18-44
Clayton Koppes, “Anglo-Saxon Movie Censorships: American and British Film Regulation, 1900-1930” (2011)

Feb. 22  
**Regulating Other Media**

John H. Houchin, *Censorship of the American Theatre in the Twentieth Century* (2003), Chaps. 2 and 3
David Thomas, David Carlton, and Anne Etienne, *Theatre Censorship: From Walpole to Wilson*, chap. 3

Feb. 27  
**Interpretations of Censorship and Early Movies**

Feb. 29  
**FIRST ESSAY DUE AT 3 PM**

March 5  
**But What About the First Amendment?**

Mutual v. Ohio (1915) (use on Lexis Nexis)

II. CENSORSHIP CONTROVERSIES AND HOLLYWOOD

March 7  
**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

**March 12**  
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**  
Production Codes, continued

**March 19, 21**  
No Class

**March 24**  
SECOND ESSAY DUE AT 3 PM

**March 26, 28**  
No Class – Spring Break

**April 2**  
The Evolution of Movie Censorship in the Early 1930s: Codes, Catholics, and Commerce

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

**April 4**  
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)

### III. CENSORSHIP IN ACTION: CASE STUDIES

**April 9**
Screening of *I'm No Angel (Mae West, 1934)*

**April 11**
What Was It About Mae?

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

**April 16**
Screening of *Anna Karenina* (Greta Garbo, 1935)

**April 18**
After *Anna*: What Is Censorship?

Review Jacobs

**April 23**
A Screwball Comedy (TBA)

**April 25**
The Instability of Meaning in Screwball Comedy

**April 30**
Screening of *Double Indemnity (1944)*

**May 2**
Film Noir Undermines the Code

Sheri Chenin Biesen, *Blackout: World War II and the Origins of Film Noir*, pp. 92-123

### IV. CONCLUSIONS

**May 7**
From Mutual to Miracle: The Shifting Cultural and 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)

May 9  
Screening of *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, 1966)

May 11  
Conclusion: Censorship and Its Ambiguities

*Final project due at time of final exam*

*1.24.12*