

OBERLIN COLLEGE

History 406

**MOTION PICTURE CENSORSHIP
IN THE UNITED STATES**

**Clayton Koppes
Professor of History
Fall Semester 2013**

The history of the first seventy-five years of the American cinema is a history of censorship. From the 1890s, when the first images flickered across the nickelodeons' tiny screens, to 1968, when today's ratings system was established, movies in the United States operated within a complex web of censorship, both governmental and internal to Hollywood. Controversies raged over what could be shown and said on the screen. To some people, controlling the cinema was one of the major social and cultural issues of the day. Paradoxically, despite the censorship, the movies thrived in the United States. Many of Hollywood's greatest artistic triumphs were produced during the era of censorship. Every country had movie censorship, often more restrictive than that practiced in the U.S. As perverse as it might sound, some would argue that censorship was indispensable to Hollywood's success during its golden age.

This course explores the paradoxes of American movie censorship, from the early 1900s to the 1960s, in a cultural, social, and political context. We examine who wanted censorship and why – and how censorship demands influenced Hollywood production. These developments are set against changing political and social understandings of the role of free speech and community standards. Since the American experience cannot be understood in a vacuum, the course includes some transnational material, chiefly on Great Britain, the most directly comparable relevant case. The course also introduces, as most movie censorship studies have not, recent scholarship that complicates conventional understandings of censorship.

The chief censorship issue was desire. Other issues cropped up from time to time, sometimes involving crime or politics. But it was desire, especially as expressed by transgressive women, that became the hottest issue and drove most censorship controversies.

Several landmark films that illustrate the progression of censorship will be screened. All are Hollywood products, except for Louis Malle's *The Lovers*, which provoked the landmark Supreme Court ruling in *Jacobellis v. Ohio* (1964), famous for Justice Potter Stewart's quip: "I know it when I see it." People always knew "it" when they saw "it," but "it" underwent vast changes in the first seventy-five years of the American cinema.

Expectations

Since a colloquium only succeeds if everyone is prepared and participates, students are expected to come to class having read and reflected on the assigned readings. In weeks when reading is especially heavy, I'll divide up readings and have different blocs of the class report on their selections. Informed, civil discussion at each session is expected, and class participation will be helpful in resolving borderline grades at semester's end. Disagreement is expected. As science fiction writer Robert Heinlein said, "I never learned anything from anybody who agreed with me."

Students with a disability should consult with me. All reasonable accommodations will be made.

Students will write a response paper of approximately two pages for each movie that is screened in which you consider the film in relation to censorship issues. The response papers count a total of 10 percent of the final grade.

Students will also write three synthetic essays, each of which counts 20 percent of the final grade. The final project counts 30 percent of the final grade.

The final project, which should be 12 to 15 pages in length, entails a focused analysis of a key theme related to movie censorship as

played out in particular films. While I'm open to various topics, here are some possibilities: Marlene Dietrich and censorship in *Morocco*, *Blonde Venus*, and *Desire*. Mae West as provocateur and object of censorship in *She Done Him Wrong*, *I'm No Angel*, and *Belle of the Nineties* (originally titled *It Ain't No Sin*). Greta Garbo in *Queen Christina*, *Anna Karenina*, and *Camille*. Censorship-busting films of Tennessee Williams – *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Baby Doll*, and *Suddenly, Last Summer*. The controversy over Malle's *The Lovers*, from Cleveland to the Supreme Court.

I'll be happy to meet with students at any time about any issue related to the course.

Sept. 3

Introduction: What Is Censorship?

Sept. 10

Censorship: The New Scholarship

Annabel Patterson, *Censorship and Interpretation: The Conditions of Writing and Reading in Early Modern England* (1991), intro, 3-31

Richard Burt, "(Un)Censoring in Detail: The Fetish of Censorship in the Early Modern Past and the Postmodern Present," 17-41, in Robert C. Post, ed., *Censoring and Silencing: Practices of Cultural Regulation* (1998)

Michael Holquist, "Corrupt Originals: The Paradox of Censorship," *PMLA*, 109 (1994), 14-25.

Helen Freshwater, "Towards a Redefinition of Censorship," in Beate Mueller, ed., *Censorship & Cultural Regulation in the Modern Age* (Amsterdam, 2004), 225-242.

Nora Gilbert, *Better Left Unsaid: Victorian Novels, Hays Code Films, and the Benefits of Censorship* (2013), intro, 1-14

Sept. 17

Regulating Early Movies: The Argument

Jane Addams, "The House of Dreams" from *The Spirit of Youth and the City Streets* (1909) (Handout)

Sara J. Smith, *Children, Cinema & Censorship: From Dracula to the Dead End*

Kids (2005), 18-44

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

Recommended:

J. M. Coetzee, *Giving Offense: Essays on Censorship* (1996), 1-33

Paul Boyer, "The Vice Societies in the Progressive Era," in *Purity in Print: Book Censorship in America*, 23-52

John H. Houchin, *Censorship of the American Theatre in the Twentieth Century*, Chap. 2

David Thomas, David Carlton, and Anne Etienne, *Theatre Censorship: From Walpole to Wilson*, chap. 3

Sept. 24

But What About the First Amendment?

Mutual v. Ohio (U. S. Supreme Court, 1915) (use on Lexis Nexus)

John Wertheimer, "Mutual Film Reviewed: The Movies, Censorship, and Free Speech in Progressive America," *American Journal of Legal History*, 37 (1993)

David Rabban, *Free Speech in Its Forgotten Years* (1997), 173-176

Oct. 1

***** FIRST ESSAY DUE AT CLASS TIME *****

Screening of *Red Dust* (1932)

Oct. 8

SOUND AND THE DEPRESSION: HOLLYWOOD AT THE EDGE OF CULTURAL CONSENSUS

Screening of *Blonde Venus* (Marlene Dietrich, 1932)

Mary Beth Hamilton, *When I'm Bad I'm Better*, chaps. 1-4

Lea Jacobs, *The Wages of Sin*, intro and chaps. 1-4

Alison M. Parker, *Purifying America: Women, Cultural Reform, and Pro-Censorship Activism, 1873-1933* (1997), 134-157

Leigh Wheeler, *Against Obscenity: Reform and the Politics of Womanhood* (2004), 46-72

Francis G. Couvares, "Hollywood, Main Street, and the Church: Trying to Censor the Movies before the Production Code," in Couvares, ed., *Movie Censorship and American Culture* (1996), 129-158

Thomas Doherty, *Pre-Code Hollywood: Sex, Immorality, and Insurrection In American Cinema* (1999), chap. 5
Houchin, *Censorship of the American Theater*, chap. 3 (recommended)

Oct. 15

THE STRUGGLE OVER CENSORSHIP IN THE EARLY 1930S

Screening of *She Done Him Wrong* (Mae West, 1932)

Production Codes (handouts):

T. P. O'Connor's 43 Rules of the BBFC (1917)
BBFC Modified Grounds for Censorship (1926)
MPPDA, "Don'ts and Be Carefuls" (1927)
MPPDA, Motion Picture Production Code (1930)

Hamilton, *When I'm Bad I'm Better*, chaps. 5-8

Richard Maltby, "The Production Code and the Hays Office," in Tino Balio, Ed., *Grand Design: Hollywood as Modern Business Enterprise, 1930-1939* (1993), 37-71

Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Censored: Morality Codes, Catholics, and the Movies* (1994), pages TBA

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

Oct. 22 No Class – Fall Break

Oct. 29

HOLLYWOOD UNDER THE CODE: THE "BRENNING" OF AMERICA

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

Jacobs, *The Wages of Sin*, chaps. 5-7

Thomas Doherty, *Hollywood's Censor: Joseph I. Breen and the Production Code Administration* (2007), 97-120

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

Hamilton, *When I'm Bad I'm Better*, chap. 9-end

Screening of *Desire* (Marlene Dietrich, 1937) at your leisure

Nov. 5

***** SECOND ESSAY DUE AT CLASS TIME *****

SCREWBALL COMEDY UNDERMINES THE CODE

Screening of *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek* (Preston Sturges, 1944)

Gilbert, *Better Left Unsaid*, chap. 1

NOV. 11 (Monday), evening

Screening of *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951)

NOV. 12

“IT BEGAN WITH STREETCAR”

Elia Kazan, *Elia Kazan: A Life* (1998), 416-17, 432-39

Kazan, *Kazan on Directing* (2009), 156-64

Kazan essay in *New York Times* (1951) (handout)

Ellen Dowling, “The Derailment of A Streetcar Named Desire,” *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 4 (1989), 233-240

Leonard Leff, “And Transfer to Cemetery: The Streetcars Named Desire,” *Film Quarterly*, 55 (2002), 29-38

Gilbert, *Better Left Unsaid*, chap. 4

Clayton Koppes, “Kim Hunter in *A Streetcar Named Desire*: We Had Considered *Anna Karenina* a Big Deal”

Nov. 19

Screening of *Baby Doll* (Carroll Baker, 1956)

R. Barton Palmer and William Robert Bray, *Hollywood's Tennessee: The Williams Films and Postwar America* (2009), chap. 5

Nov. 26

NO CLASS -- THANKSGIVING -- THIRD ESSAY DUE AT NOON

Dec. 3

“ALMOST EVERY KNOWN PERVERSION”

Screening of *Suddenly, Last Summer* (Katharine Hepburn, Elizabeth Taylor, Montgomery Clift, 1960)

Dec. 10

“I KNOW IT WHEN IT SEE IT”

Screening of *The Lovers* (Jeanne Moreau, 1959)

Reviews (handouts)

Supreme Court opinions in *Jacobellis v. Ohio*, 1964 (use on Lexis Nexus)

Dec. 16

FINAL PROJECT DUE AT 12 NOON