“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 calvary 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 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, focus 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 broad 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 on Wednesday evenings 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 three writing assignments. The first two are synthetic 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 essay (up to ten pages) aims at a synthesis of the issues surrounding movie censorship. Each essay counts one-third of the final grade. I encourage you to do a special project as a replacement for the final essay. There are many possibilities: You might compare a literary text with its Hollywood treatment; *Streetcar Named Desire* 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.

Active participation in discussion, based on careful reading and analysis, is essential. Class participation may be helpful in resolving borderline grades.

**Required texts**


1. Sept. 3  The Movie Ratings System: Censorship by Another Name?

Screening and discussion of This Film Is Not Yet Rated by Kirby Dick

2. Sept. 10  Censorship: Theoretical and Historical Issues

Lee Grieveson, 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

[Burt and Gavison essays are from Robert C. Post, Censorship and Silencing: Practices of Cultural Regulation (1998)]

3. Sept. 17  Regulating the Early Movies

Grieveson, chaps. 2-4
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

4. Sept. 24  Movie Censorship and the First Amendment

Grieveson, chap. 5 and conclusion
David Rabban, Free Speech in Its Forgotten Years (1997), 173-176

[Since this class session is at the same time as the convocation featuring Newt Gingrich, we’ll negotiate an alternate time so that those who wish may attend the convocation.]
Sept. 28 (Sunday)

First Essay Due at Class Time

Screening of Marlene Dietrich in “Blonde Venus” (1932)

5. Oct. 1 Sound: The New World of Movie Regulation

[To cope with the heavy reading load this week, the class will be divided into sections with each reporting on particular selections.]

Lea Jacobs, Wages of Sin, preface and chap. 1
Richard Maltby, “The Production Code and the Hays Office,” in Tino Balio, 
Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930-1939 
Gregory D. Black, Hollywood Censored: Morality Codes, Catholics, and the Movies 
(1994), pages TBA
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
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.
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)

Oct. 8 No Class – Yom Kippur

6. Oct. 12 (Sunday) Screening of Mae West in I’m No Angel (1934)

Oct. 15 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
Thomas Doherty, Hollywood’s Censor: Joseph I. Breen & the Production Code 
Administration 2007), 97-120.
Leff & Simmons,Dame in the Kimono, chaps. 4-6 (recommended)
Oct. 22        No Class. Fall Break.

7.          Oct. 29        The PCA in Operation

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

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

*Nov. 5 Second Essay Due at class time*

8.          Nov. 5        *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)
          Screened in class

*Nov. 9 (Sunday) Marlon Brando in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951)*

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

9.          Nov. 12        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)

10.         Nov. 19       The Code and the Legion of Decency Embattled

          Gregory Black, *The Catholic Crusade Against the Movies, 1940-1975* (1997), 143-175
          Leff and Simmons, *Dame in the Kimono*, chaps. 6-8 (recommended)

          *Tea and Sympathy* (1956) screened in class
11. Nov. 23 (Sunday)  Taylor and Burton in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? (1966)*

Nov. 26  No Class because of Thanksgiving

12. Dec. 3  The Ratings System

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

Arthur Penn’s *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967) screened in class

13. Dec. 10  Speculations and Conclusions: Censorship and Collaboration

Vaughn, chaps. 5-10
Review readings from week 2
Reprise of Dick’s *This Film Is Not Yet Rated*

*Final Essay or Project Due on a Date to Be Determined*