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 kinetoscopes’ 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 case. The course 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 enacted by transgressive women, that became the hottest issue and drove most censorship controversies.

Several landmark Hollywood films that illustrate the progression of censorship will be screened.

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 heavy, I’ll divide up readings and have different blocs of the class report on their selections. In some cases I’ll provide draft chapters of my book in
progress on the history of censorship; these are strictly for class use and may not be copied or shared outside the class.

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 each week. The response papers count a total of 10 percent of the final grade.

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

The final project is a paper 12 to 15 pages in length in which you analyze how censorship was applied to a particular film, using the files of the Production Code Administration. I’ll give you more details and suggestions about pictures that would be particularly productive for this project.

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

Feb. 3 Introduction: What Is Censorship?

Feb. 10 Censorship: The New Scholarship

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

Feb. 17 Censors at Work

Robert Darnton, Censors at Work (2014), pages TBA.
Feb. 24  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:


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

March 3  But What About the First Amendment?

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


March 3  *** FIRST ESSAY DUE AT CLASS TIME ***

March 10  HOLLYWOOD AT THE EDGE OF CULTURAL CONSENSUS

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)

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

March 17 THE STRUGGLE OVER CENSORSHIP IN THE EARLY 1930S
Screening of Blonde Venus (Marlene Dietrich, 1932)

Mary Beth Hamilton, When I’m Bad I’m Better, chaps. 1-4
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)

March 24 No Class – Fall Break

March 31 CENSORS AT WORK IN HOLLYWOOD: THE PRODUCTION CODE ADMINISTRATION
Screening of She Done Him Wrong (Mae West, 1933)

Hamilton, When I’m Bad I’m Better, chaps. 5-8
Jacobs, The Wages of Sin, chaps. 5-7
James Forman, Our Movie-Made Children (1933), pages TBA

April 7 AFTER ANNA: WHAT IS CENSORSHIP?
Screening of Anna Karenina (Greta Garbo, 1935)

Jacobs, The Wages of Sin, chaps. 5-7
Hamilton, When I’m Bad I’m Better, chaps. 9-end
Birmingham, The Most Dangerous Book, chaps. 26-27
April 14  FILM NOIR UNDERMINES THE CODE

Screening of *Double Indemnity* (Barbara Stanwyck, 1944)

Leff and Simmons, *The Dame in the Kimono*, pages TBA

April 17  (Friday)  **** SECOND ESSAY DUE AT 12 NOON ****

April 21  “IT BEGAN WITH STREETCAR”

Screening of *A Streetcar Named Desire* (Vivien Leigh, Kim Hunter, Marlon Brando, Karl Malden, 1951)

Kazan, *Kazan on Directing* (2009), 156-64
Kazan essay in *New York Times* (1951) (handout)
Leonard Leff, “And Transfer to Cemetery: The Streetcars Named Desire,”
*Film Quarterly*, 55 (2002), 29-38
Gilbert, *Better Left Unsaid*, chap. 4

April 28  MASS CONFUSIONS: DESIRE AND MIDCENTURY MASCULINITIES

Screening of *Tea and Sympathy* (Deborah Kerr, 1956)

Readings TBA

May 5  “ALMOST EVERY KNOWN PERVERSION”

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

May 16  **** FINAL PROJECT DUE AT 12 NOON ****