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978-0-521-56592-9 - Hollywood Censored: Morality Codes, Catholics, and the Movies

Gregory D. Black

Excerpt

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## INTRODUCTION

In February 1992, Roger Mahoney, Roman Catholic Cardinal of Los Angeles, told the Hollywood Anti-Pornography Coalition that the motion picture industry was an “assault against the values held by the vast majority of the people in American society.” The movie industry, he maintained, could not continue to “hide behind a misplaced cry for ‘freedom of expression.’” To curb the excessive sex and violence in current films, Mahoney called for the reinstatement of the Hollywood Production Code, which had ruled the American film industry from its adoption in 1930 until it was replaced in 1966 by the current ratings system. Industry officials expressed dismay at this plea to censor the movies.

Cardinal Mahoney’s call for a modern crusade against the movies was no surprise to Hollywood. In 1930 another Catholic priest, Father Daniel Lord, S.J., believed that the movies were corrupting American moral values. To counter the influence of immoral movies he wrote a movie code that prohibited films from glorifying criminals, gangsters, adulterers, and prostitutes. Lord’s code, which soon became the Bible of film production, banned nudity, excessive violence, white slavery, illegal drugs, miscegenation, lustful kissing, suggestive postures, and profanity from the screen. However, it went further than simply banning things from films; his code also held that films should promote the institutions of marriage and home, defend the fairness of government, and present religious institutions with reverence.

A basic premise of this code was that movies did not enjoy the same freedom of expression as the printed word or theatrical performances. This most democratic of art forms had to be regulated, Lord argued, because movies cut across all social, economic, political, and educational boundaries, attracting millions of people to its theaters every week. In order to protect the masses from the evil influence of the movies, they had to be censored.

Will Hays, president of the industry trade association, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) – popularly

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known as the Hays Office – agreed. He sponsored Lord’s code, which was adopted by the motion picture industry in 1930. Yet the Catholic church and other religious organizations were not satisfied with the way the industry enforced the code. In 1934 Catholics launched a Legion of Decency (LOD) campaign. Millions signed pledges to boycott movies judged immoral by church authorities.

To pacify religious organizations, especially the Catholic church, Hays created a new MPPDA Hollywood censorship office in 1934 – the Production Code Administration (PCA) – and gave it total control over film content. He named a lay Catholic, Joseph I. Breen, director. Breen and his staff combed every script for improprieties, whether sexual or political, before issuing a PCA seal of approval. After 1934 no film could be exhibited in a major American theater without a PCA seal.

Pressuring Breen to remain ever vigilant was the National Catholic Legion of Decency, headquartered in New York City. The Legion reviewed and rated every film released by Hollywood and distributed its ratings to every Catholic church in the United States. The LOD stood ready to condemn any film it considered immoral or dangerous. Catholics were forbidden to attend any film condemned by the church.

This system of “self-regulation” dominated film production during Hollywood’s golden era of studio production. The impact of this censorship on the content, flavor, feel, and image of Hollywood films has not been fully understood or appreciated. This book, using archival materials from the studios, the Hays Office, and the Catholic church, details how the dual forces of industry self-regulation – the Hays Office (and its censorship arm, the PCA) and the Catholic Legion of Decency – fought Hollywood studios for control of film content during the 1930s. By the end of the decade the war was over: The PCA stood supreme and the Catholic Legion of Decency struck fear in the hearts of every Hollywood producer. No film could be produced or exhibited without PCA approval, and Hollywood did not dare to challenge Catholic authorities.

Cardinal Mahoney’s plea is for a return to those heady days when prelates and censors, who presumed they spoke for the American people, controlled what people saw and heard at the movies.

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## CHAPTER I

### RESTRICTING ENTERTAINMENT: THE MOVIES CENSORED

Movies are schools of vice and crime . . . offering trips to hell for [a] nickle.  
– Rev. Wilbur Crafts

Hollywood. The name was magic, the lure overwhelming. Generations of Americans spent untold hours in darkened theaters captivated by a magical fantasy world. Young girls swooned over the latest Hollywood heartthrob while boys dreamed about a life of adventure and glory. As had their pioneer ancestors before them, thousands trekked westward; their goal was Hollywood. Most were rejected by the magical kingdom, but a lucky few were “discovered” and became “stars” – America’s royalty of the twentieth century.

The lure of Hollywood reached far beyond the dreams of innocent youth. Artists of all varieties made pilgrimages to the world’s film capital. From New York, London, Vienna, Rome, Moscow, and even Paris came the famous, the talented, the hopeful, the has-beens, and the desperate, hopeful that this mecca of worldwide entertainment would bestow massive blessings of fame, wealth, and power.

In the spring of 1925 a young writer was about to live that modern dream. Ben Hecht, journalist, novelist, and playwright, was down and out. Despite having published a well-received novel, *Erik Dorn* (1921), and editing and publishing the *Chicago Literary Times*, Hecht was broke. A recent migrant to New York, he was two months behind in his rent when a telegram arrived from Hollywood. “Will you accept three hundred per week to work for Paramount Pictures. All expenses paid. The three hundred is peanuts. Millions are to be grabbed out here and your only competition is idiots.”<sup>1</sup> The telegram from his friend and fellow writer Herman Mankiewicz changed his life. Hecht dashed out to Hollywood, and within two weeks Paramount rewarded him with a \$10,000 bonus for an eighteen-page outline of the 1927 gangster film *Underworld*.

Hecht was an enormously talented writer, one of that rare breed who could write quickly and effectively for the screen. He was said to

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be “the fastest hack” in the West. His Hollywood career extended over four decades and included original screenplays, adaptations, and an enormous amount of work as an uncredited “script doctor.”<sup>2</sup> By his own account he worked on over sixty scripts. For his forays into Hollywood he was lavishly paid – from \$50,000 to \$125,000 for two to eight weeks’ work. He once demanded, and got, from Howard Hughes \$1,000 per day paid sharply at 6:00 P.M. David O. Selznick hired him at a slightly reduced rate of \$3,000 a week to dash off dialogue for *Gone with the Wind*. Despite his monetary success, Hecht always kept Hollywood at arm’s length. Like many writers, he did not consider his work for the movies serious art; it was more a means of replenishing his bank account. When his work was finished, he retreated to New York.<sup>3</sup>

As much as anything it was the movies’ lack of honesty that disenchanting Hecht. On his arrival in Hollywood in 1925, Mankiewicz gave him the formula for successful screenwriting:

I want to point out to you . . . that in a novel a hero can lay ten girls and marry a virgin for a finish. In a movie this is not allowed. The hero, as well as the heroine, has to be a virgin. The villain can lay anybody he wants, have as much fun as he wants cheating and stealing, getting rich and whipping the servants. But you have to shoot him in the end. When he falls with a bullet in his forehead, it is advisable that he clutch at the Gobelin tapestry on the library wall and bring it down over his head like a symbolic shroud.<sup>4</sup>

Hecht followed this sage advice and gave Paramount *Underworld*. It had no heroes, only villains.

In early 1951 Hecht was back in Hollywood. When Mankiewicz had summoned him westward two decades earlier, Hollywood had been a boom town; now it seemed more like a ghost town. Hollywood had changed. The golden age of studio production was over. The war, the federal government’s breakup of the studios as a monopoly, and the challenge offered by a new technology, television, were changing the industry. At the end of a long night, Hecht and David O. Selznick, a producer and friend of more than twenty years, walked the deserted streets of the movie capital. Perhaps depressed by too much alcohol, Selznick looked back on the “golden age” of the movies. He saw nothing, he told Hecht, but a “flood of claptrap,” not “ten out of ten thousand” films were worth remembering. What could have been an art form at “the center of a new human expression” turned out to be “a junk industry.” When Hecht told Selznick he was having trouble determining what to say in his memoirs about his long career in Hollywood, the producer turned to him and said: “Write the truth.”<sup>5</sup>

Hecht’s book – among the most revealing portrayals of tinsel town – claimed that the movies “have slapped into the American mind more

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human misinformation in one evening than the Dark Ages could muster in a decade. One basic plot only has appeared daily in their fifteen thousand theaters – the triumph of virtue and the overthrow of wickedness.” In the movies, wrote Hecht, “any man who broke the laws, man’s or God’s, must die, or go to jail, or become a monk, or restore the money he stole before wandering off into the desert.” In the movies “anyone who didn’t believe in God . . . was set right by seeing either an angel or witnessing some feat of levitation by one of the characters”; in the movies “the most potent and brilliant villains are powerless before little children, parish priests or young virgins with large boobies”; and in the movies there “are no problems of labor, politics, domestic life or sexual abnormality” that cannot “be solved happily by a simple Christian phrase or a fine American motto.”<sup>6</sup>

Why did the movies fail to become a new center of human expression? Why did they lack honesty? Why was virtue ever triumphant over wickedness and social problems resolved by simplistic pieties? Part of the answer naturally rests within Hollywood’s “studio system” of production. Movies were the product of a large corporate, collaborative enterprise. The cost of production and distribution was enormous. The goal of the studios, and of the corporations that controlled them, was profit, not art. Ever fearful of losing any segment of their audience, the studios either carefully avoided controversial topics or presented them within a tightly constructed framework that evaded larger issues.

However, as Mankiewicz, Selznick, and Hecht knew all too well, much of the blame for the failure of the movies to deal more frankly and honestly with life lay with a rigid censorship imposed on the industry. Cities, states, foreign governments, and, most important, the industry itself had prescribed rigid restrictions on the content of films during its golden era of studio production. This system of censorship, which the film industry not only accepted but embraced, encouraged, and enforced, was a major reason for the failure of Hollywood to develop film beyond the “harmless entertainment” label that has been firmly fixed on it.

Censorship is a key ingredient in understanding how films were made during the studio era, and is vital in any analysis of their content or structure. From the early 1930s to the mid-1960s, every story considered, script written, and film produced was subjected to a thorough cleansing by industry censors before reaching the screen. Preproduction censorship, administered by the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) – commonly known as the Hays Office – was an integral part of the studio production system.

This was especially true during the 1930s, when this system of industry “self-regulation” was established. Determined to keep world-

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wide markets open to Hollywood films, and opposed to any type of viewer age restriction on their product, the Hays Office adopted a pre-production censorship system that attempted to prevent questionable material, both moral and political, from reaching the screen. The Hays Office movie code – written by a Catholic priest, Father Daniel Lord, S.J., and eventually enforced by a lay Catholic, Joseph Breen – maintained that movies did not have the same latitude as books, plays, magazines, and newspapers in presenting alternative views on controversial topics to a mass audience. No film, foreign or domestic, played in any major American theater without being submitted to industry censors who used Lord's code to determine acceptable screen material. Standing outside this system of industry censors were state and municipal censorship boards and, after 1934, the Catholic Legion of Decency, which were prepared to pounce on any film they deemed offensive.

The major Hollywood production studios – MGM, Warner Bros., Universal, United Artists, Paramount, RKO, Columbia, and Twentieth Century–Fox – bitterly fought this censorship system, which prevented them from making more realistic and honest films. While more committed to box-office profits than art, the studios did attempt to bring some realistic, hard-hitting drama to the screen, but were thwarted by industry censors. It became impossible after the mid-1930s and beyond, for example, to make a reasonably accurate film from Zola's *Nana*, Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, or Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. These novels were too frank in their discussions of adultery, corruption, and injustice; their screen versions were altered to make them more in tune with the conservative moral, political, and economic value system that dominated the movie censorship code.

Born in American cities at the turn of the century, entertainment films quickly transcended ethnic, class, religious, and political lines to become the dominant institution of popular culture. By 1907 a revolution had taken place in the entertainment industry. Motion picture theaters in New York City recorded a daily attendance of over two hundred thousand a day – a figure that doubled on Sundays, when working-class families flocked to the movies in droves.<sup>7</sup> Nationally some three thousand nickelodeons lured more than two million customers daily. By 1910 there were ten thousand such movie theaters in the United States. The nation, wrote *Harper's Weekly*, had a case of "nickel delirium."<sup>8</sup>

Typically, these nickelodeons were storefront theaters – dimly lit, dingy, unventilated rooms – where audiences of adult men, young unchaperoned working girls, hordes of unsupervised children, and entire families were crammed together. The nickelodeons ran nonstop from

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early in the morning to late at night. With no set show time, people drifted in and out, after shopping, after work, on Sunday – whenever they had fifteen or twenty minutes and a nickel to spare. As one early report from the mill town of Homestead, Pennsylvania, noted: “Men on their way from work, stop for a few minutes to see something of life outside the mill and home; the shopper rests while she enjoys the music . . . and the children are always begging for five cents to go to the nickelodeon.”<sup>9</sup>

The movies were popular because they were cheap and readily available; but most of all, they were enormously entertaining. According to widely held myth, the stuff of silent cinema was an endless chase scene of “Keystone Kops,” leering villains, or a mindless parade of slapstick comedy. Early silent films, most people seem to believe, were crude entertainment for indiscriminating audiences who knew little or no English and were more fascinated by the novelty of the technology than by the quality of the art.

Like most general impressions, there is some truth in this view; but only some. Almost from the beginning, filmmakers turned to popular literature, drama, and contemporary issues for film plots. Historians Kay Solan and Kevin Brownlow have shown that the content of silent films was contemporary, wide-ranging, and frank. Brownlow chronicles a silent cinema that revealed “the corruption of city politics, the scandal of white slave rackets, the exploitation of immigrants,” with gangsters, pimps, loan sharks, and drug addicts sharing the screen with Mary Pickford.<sup>10</sup> Solan noted that “the cinema championed the cause of labor, lobbied against political ‘bosses,’ and often gave dignity to the struggles of the urban poor.”<sup>11</sup> These early flickers often poked fun at militant suffragettes, upheld or debunked Victorian moral standards, and “ridiculed labor unions and [well-known] business tycoons.”<sup>12</sup>

Early films, such as *Capital versus Labor*, *The Molly Maguires*, or *The Labor Wars in the Coal Mines*, *The Cocaine Traffic*, *The Drug Traffic*, *Suffragettes’ Revenge*, *The Candidate*, *The Governor’s Boss*, *Votes for Women*, or *The Reform Candidate*, indicate that the people who flocked to the films got more than just comedic release for their nickel.<sup>13</sup> According to film historian Lary May, some of these first motion pictures delighted in ridiculing “Victorian values.”<sup>14</sup>

These films, which brought delight to millions, deeply disturbed others. Movies were born during the height of the Progressive reform movement in the United States. Progressives exposed corruption in government, and shocked the American public with lurid exposés of child labor, urban living conditions, prostitution, and alcoholism. As remedies they sponsored legislation to regulate the use of child labor, used the licensing power of the state to enforce safety and sanitary

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codes, passed compulsory education laws, regulated the production of consumer products with “pure food and drug” acts, and reformed the electoral process on the local, state, and federal level. The entire reform movement was responsible for myriad changes that attempted to make American cities more livable, educate immigrants as to American values, protect the general public from exploitation by big business, and make government responsible for the public’s general welfare.

Progressives also worried about the impact of modernization and urban living on the moral fiber of the nation. They argued that neighboring saloons, dance-halls, and houses of prostitution destroyed traditional family life. They looked to government to create a more livable environment and reinforce traditional Victorian moral standards through “protective” legislation. They were well aware that, in advocating a ten- or eight-hour workday for adults and eliminating child labor, they were creating “leisure” time; they hoped that this time could be used to “restore American ideals in a pure form.”<sup>15</sup> It was essential, therefore, to protect the public from amusements that might corrupt this “uplifting” process. With religious fervor, Progressives attacked saloons, dance-halls, houses of prostitution, and equally harmful “immoral” books, magazines, newspapers, plays – and, of course, movies.

To counter these “immoral” amusements, Progressives advocated creating “green space” within the concrete jungle of American cities. As one leader of the playground movement said: “No one who has observed children carefully in any city . . . between the close of school and supper has found any considerable percentage of them were doing anything that was worthwhile.”<sup>16</sup> Cities had the responsibility, they argued, to build parks and playgrounds where adults and children could spend their leisure time in a “moral” climate. Good playgrounds, said one reformer, could instill “more ethics and good citizenship . . . in a single week than can be inculcated by Sunday school teachers . . . in a decade.”<sup>17</sup> Notably in the first ten years of the century there was an explosion of park building across the United States. In Chicago more than \$15 million was spent on parks and recreation centers in less than a decade.

The movies were an especially troublesome form of recreation for Progressive reformers. The environment was all wrong: Rather than open space, with clean air and exercise, the theaters to which children were flocking were dirty and dingy. Sitting passively in the dark, their young minds were being polluted by vile movies just as their lungs were being polluted by unclean air. “Free hours determine the morals of the nation,” intoned Joseph R. Fulk, Nebraska’s superintendent of schools.<sup>18</sup> With millions of urbanites pouring into the movie theaters



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each day, Progressive reformers worried that a new generation of children would learn their moral lessons at the movies.

Jane Addams, the consummate reformer whose Hull House in Chicago brought her international recognition, wrote that the movies were a “veritable house of dreams” for the children of America. Addams was convinced, like so many of her day, that movies were a more powerful influence on the minds of children than any other form of communication or education. She believed that what they saw on the screen directly and immediately was transformed into action. If children saw crime movies, they would become criminals; if they saw movies with an “immoral” theme, they would adopt those values as their own and would reject the efforts of home, school, and church to instill traditional middle-class values of behavior. Addams wrote that it was “astounding that a city allows thousands of its youth to fill their impressionable minds with [movie] absurdities which certainly will become the foundation for their working moral codes.”<sup>19</sup>

Yet Addams and the Progressives recognized that, conversely, if films could preach positive values, their potential to educate, to play a positive role in socializing the citizenry, was unlimited. Convinced that movies were “making over the minds of our urban population,” Addams thought films ought to preach good citizenship, the superiority of Anglo-Saxon ideals, and the value of hard work. If movies could be turned into morality lessons for workers, they could become an ally in the Progressive’s fight to protect the masses against the combined forces of poverty, corruption, and injustice.

Ministers, social workers, civic reformers, police, politicians, women’s clubs, and civic organizations joined in, accusing the movies of inciting young boys to crime by glorifying criminals and of corrupting young women by romanticizing “illicit” love affairs. These “moral guardians” – a loose-knit confederation of reformers who ranged from thoughtful and perceptive critics like Jane Addams to religious reactionaries like Canon William Shaefe Chase, rector of Christ Church in Brooklyn – claimed that movies were changing traditional values, not reflecting them, and demanded that government use its licensing and regulatory powers to censor this new form of entertainment.

Film producers, however, were interested in profit, not preaching. Progressives and moral guardians, unable to control film content, increasingly became convinced that movies were the cause of many of society’s ills, and came to see them as a major social evil. In the view of such reformers, regulating this new industry was akin to regulating manufacturers of tainted meat. As one YMCA official stated:

Unless the law steps in and does for moving-picture shows what it has done for meat inspection and pure food, the cinematograph will continue to inject

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into our social order an element of degrading principle. The only way that the people, and especially the children, can be safeguarded from the influence of evil pictures is by careful regulation of the places of exhibitions.<sup>20</sup>

At a conference on child welfare in 1909, Edward H. Chandler characterized motion pictures as “a new and curious disease [that] had made its appearance in our cities, selecting for its special victims only boys and girls from ten to fourteen.”<sup>21</sup> The minister of the Calvary Evangelical Church in Philadelphia called movies “schools for degenerates and criminals.”<sup>22</sup> Another minister, the Reverend Wilbur F. Crafts, said movies were “schools of vice and crime . . . offering trips to hell for [a] nickle.”<sup>23</sup> A professor of philosophy at the University of Kansas warned the nation that

pictures are more degrading than the dime novel because they represent real flesh and blood characters and import moral lessons directly through the senses. The dime novel cannot lead the boy further than his limited imagination will allow, but the motion picture forces upon his view things that are new, they give firsthand experience.<sup>24</sup>

Canon Chase, who campaigned against the movies for three decades, called films “the greatest enemy of civilization.”<sup>25</sup>

These self-designated “guardians of public morality” began to agitate for legislation to control this new “vice.” Chicago’s Vice Commission first recommended that the city “oversee dance halls, ice-cream parlors,” and demanded that movies be shown only in “well-lighted halls.”<sup>26</sup> When this impractical suggestion was rejected, commissioners countered with the demand that “indecent vaudeville, picture-slot machines, [and] nickelodeons” be banned entirely.<sup>27</sup> When that proposal failed, Chicago used its licensing power to establish America’s first ordinance empowering censors to regulate the content of films. Enacted in November 1907, the ordinance required exhibitors to secure a permit from the Superintendent of Police before any film could be exhibited to the public. This “prior censorship” allowed a film to be banned if police censors judged it

immoral or obscene, or [if it] portrays depravity, criminality or lack of virtue of a class of citizens of any race, color, creed or religion and exposes them to contempt, derision or obloquy, or tends to produce a breach of the peace or riots, or purports to represent any hanging, lynching or burning of a human being.<sup>28</sup>

The job of censoring films was assigned to Chicago’s police department. While their intent was presumably moral, the police almost immediately fell into the trap that would characterize movie censorship for decades to come. One of the first films censored was a version of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. Lieutenant Joel A. Smith, who pruned the