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## HOLLYWOOD, CENSORSHIP, AND THE MOTION PICTURE PRODUCTION CODE, 1927-1968

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The Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) Production Code Administration Files collection documents forty years of self-regulation and censorship in the motion picture industry. The Production Code was written in 1929 by Martin J. Quigley, an influential editor and publisher of motion picture trade periodicals, and Reverend Daniel A. Lord, a Jesuit advisor to Hollywood filmmakers. Officially accepted in 1930 by the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), the precursor organization to the MPAA, the Production Code presented guidelines governing American movie production. The five hundred titles selected were chosen by the staff of the library's Special Collections Department, with advice from film historian Leonard J. Leff.

**Date Range:** 1927-1968

**Content:** 30,899 images

**Source Library:** Margaret Herrick Library of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, California. **Source Note:** Motion Picture Association of America Production Code Administration collection, selected from the holdings of the Margaret Herrick Library of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in Beverly Hills, California. This collection comprises the content of the former microfilm product entitled.

### **Detailed Description:**

#### *Hollywood and the Production Code*

On July 15, 1934, with considerable fanfare and high hopes for an extended engagement, the Production Code Administration (PCA) officially opened for business. On November 1, 1968, after a long and successful run that had, in truth, been playing to an empty house for years, the show finally struck the sets and closed the doors. During the interim, a passage spanning the vaunted Golden Age of Hollywood and the less-glimmering sunset of the studio system, the PCA vetted, censored, and sealed virtually every Hollywood movie released in the American marketplace. In its own glory days, the in-house censorship regime (motion

picture executives always preferred the term "self-regulation") was as essential to the smooth operation of the studio machinery as the soundstages, stars, and 35mm film stock.

Hollywood submitted to the rigorous oversight of the PCA because the alternatives to "censorship at the source" were far worse. After all, censorship had been a fact of creative and commercial life for motion picture producers from the very birth of the medium, when even the modest osculations of the middle-aged lovebirds in Thomas Edison's *The Kiss* (1896) scandalized cadres of (literally) Victorian ministers, matrons, and other variants of a sour-faced species known as the "bluenose." By common consent, the artistically vital and culturally disruptive spectacle of the motion picture - an entertainment accessible to all levels of society and degrees of moral temperament, including unassimilated immigrants, impressionable juveniles, and other menacing types - required editorial supervision from more mature, pious, and usually Protestant sensibilities. Keeping pace with the rise of the motion picture industry, city and state censor boards proliferated to examine, shred, and ban the unruly, uppity, and increasingly popular art.

Under the U.S. Constitution, the censors had every right to wield their scissors at whatever offended their eyes. In 1915, in *Mutual Film Corporation v. Industrial Commission of Ohio*, the Supreme Court ruled that the movies were not a revolutionary new communications medium but "a business, pure and simple, originated and conducted for profit, like other spectacles, not to be regarded...as part of the press of the country, or as organs of public opinion."<sup>1</sup> Being a commercial enterprise, motion pictures could be regulated and run out of town by cities, states, and, by logical and ominous extension, the federal government.

In this legal and cultural environment, unprotected by the First Amendment and battered by assaults from moral guardians outraged at the salacious, violent, and tradition-smashing manners of the silent screen, the pioneers of the nascent industry that had settled in Hollywood scrambled to beat back a coast-to-coast phalanx of censors inflicting unkindly cuts on their product line. In 1922, beset by a spate of sensational scandals that seemed to validate Hollywood's reputation as a Sodom on the Pacific, the studio chieftains (already dubbed "moguls") formed a protective consortium by way of defensive perimeter, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (the MPPDA; after 1945, the Motion Picture Association of America, the MPAA), and appointed as its president Will H. Hays, the former postmaster general in the administration of Warren G. Harding and an upright, teetotaling elder of the Presbyterian Church. Hays put the industry on a solid financial basis with his contacts on Wall Street, kept federal censors at bay with his influence in Washington, D.C., and placated the moral guardians with soothing words and Protestant probity. In June 1927, in his most reassuring public relations gesture, Hays promulgated a prim list of cautionary injunctions for motion picture content called the "Don'ts and Be Carefuls" and appointed his assistant, Colonel Jason S. Joy, to command a watchful supervisory agency, the Studio Relations Committee.

By the close of the Jazz Age, however, the sound revolution rung in by *The Jazz Singer* (1927) was inciting a renewed chorus of howls over Hollywood immorality: the gestures and mimed insinuation of the silent screen now burst forth audibly in sinister wisecracks and

sex-drenched sweet talk. For the moral guardians, the sound revolution just cranked up the volume on a sacrilegious racket.

To placate the resurgent opposition, the MPPDA promised to abide by a set of guidelines more extensive and restrictive than the simple nostrums enshrined in the "Don'ts and Be Carefuls." The document that articulated the new commitment to screen morality was the Production Code. Written in 1929 by Martin J. Quigley, an influential editor and publisher of motion picture trade periodicals, and Reverend Daniel A. Lord, a multitalented Jesuit who first lent his spiritual expertise to Hollywood as the Catholic advisor to Cecil B. DeMille's biblical epic The King of Kings (1927), the Production Code was the template for a theological takeover of American cinema. As devout Catholics, both men viewed the movies not merely as a business opportunity but as a moral responsibility.

The document crafted by Quigley and Lord contained two sections, a philosophical justification titled "General Principles," followed by a list of prohibitions titled "Working Principles." The first section of the original Production Code was later titled "Reasons Supporting the Code." The document that later became known as "the Code" was a summary of the original prepared at the direction of Will H. Hays, because, said Lord, "in the abbreviated form it was a more workable and convenient set of instructions."<sup>2</sup>

The first section laid out a theory of media that recognized the cathartic and escapist function of motion picture entertainment but deplored the photoplay that "tends to degrade human beings." Italicized references to "*moral importance*" and capitalized imperatives that "the motion picture has special Moral obligations" animate every line of the text. A key passage asserts the profound moral obligation filmmakers have toward young people because "the mobility, popularity, accessibility, emotional appeal, vividness, straight-forward presentation of fact in the films makes for intimate contact of a larger audience and greater emotional appeal."

The second section ("Working Principles") contained a list of positive and negative injunctions, a list far more detailed and comprehensive than the sparse "Don'ts and Be Carefuls." It reiterated the overarching philosophy ("no picture should lower the moral standards of those who see it"); provided specific instructions on "details of plot, episodes, and treatment;" and set down precise guidelines on flash points such as blasphemy, obscenity, vulgarity, costuming, and national and ethnic sensitivities. In later years, the taboos and prohibitions would be extended, sometimes directly into the Code, sometime as addenda and resolutions with Code-like authority. Though the Code was a deeply Catholic document in tone and temper, the Jesuit theology was concealed for tactical reasons under a broader, Judeo-Christian blanket. "The Code was not to be an expression of the Catholic point of view," insisted Father Lord in 1946. "It was to present principles on which all decent men would agree. Its basis was the Ten Commandments, which we felt was a standard of morality throughout the civilized world."<sup>3</sup>

On March 31, 1930, the MPPDA formally ratified what its subaltern arm in Hollywood, the Association of Motion Picture Producers, had already agreed to. The Code, both associations

pledged, would be scrupulously obeyed - whereupon, almost immediately, the studio signatories brazenly defied its letter and spirit.

For the next four years, the Code was mainly ignored due to a more urgent consideration: economic survival. In the darkest days of the Great Depression, with box office returns plummeting and more than one studio on the brink of ruin, Hollywood was willing to risk opprobrium and tussle with state censors in order to lure back a depleting audience with tommygun-toting gangsters, hip-swinging vixens, and Mae West, the leering agent provocateur who became the poster girl for pre-Code immorality. Wily producers readily outfoxed the watchmen charged with implementing the Code because, however noble its sentiments, the document lacked an effective enforcement mechanism; it depended on the good faith and willing obedience of the ostensibly regulated. First under Colonel Jason Joy and later under former New York state censor Dr. James Wingate, the Code was little heeded or obeyed. Longtime Code staffer Jack Vizzard, in his witty memoir See No Evil: Life Inside a Hollywood Censor (1970), recalled that Jason Joy was "quickly fleeced," and Dr. Wingate was reduced to more than "a second cup of cheer at cocktail time."<sup>4</sup> In the annals of Hollywood history and on repertory theater marquees, the four-year interregnum between nominal adoption of the Code in 1930 and actual enforcement of the Code in 1934 is known by what is technically a misnomer: the "pre-Code" era.

Of course, given the provocations from homicidal gangsters, seditious comedians, and mercenary vixens, the pre-Code era incited its own share of censorship battles, both externally (with state and city boards) and internally (with the Studio Relations Committee and the New York Board of the MPPDA). Colonel Joy and Dr. Wingate each labored to rein in on-screen friskiness, but producers tended to be more defiant than compliant. Howard Hughes's production of Scarface (1932), a thinly veiled film à clef of the exploits of gangster Al Capone that wallowed in picturesque violence and incestuous vibrations, was a good or, from the point of view of the Studio Relations Committee, bad example of just how far beyond the Code Hollywood might venture.

After what bent-out-of-shape bluenoses saw as a long train of abuses, the pre-Code revelry and rebellion was suppressed by an informal coalition that attacked Hollywood along three different flanks in late 1933 and early 1934. Together, the like-minded forces would make sure that the Code was worth the paper it was printed on.

First, appalled at the profligacy of the pre-Code screen and outraged at the betrayal by the moguls, Roman Catholics responded by forming the National Legion of Decency, an organization that quickly became the most effective of all the pressure groups tormenting Hollywood. The Legion launched boycotts, picketed theater fronts, and recruited millions of Catholic parishioners to refrain "under pain of sin" from patronizing immoral cinema.

At the same time, Washington was handing down a New Deal to Hollywood. On March 4, 1933, Franklin Delano Roosevelt assumed the presidency and began the dizzying economic reforms and centralization of power that marked his storied first hundred days in office. Among the industries slated for regulation and reorganization under the National Industrial Recovery Act was the motion picture industry. Not without reason, the moguls feared that

Roosevelt's brain trust would seek to regulate motion picture content with the same vigor that the Blue Eagle was auditing industry finances.

Finally, the educational and social scientific community also joined the chorus hectoring Hollywood. From 1929 to 1932, an outfit called the Motion Picture Research Council had conducted an elaborate series of experiments on the impact of motion pictures on young people, a project collectively known as the Payne Fund Studies. A synopsis of the findings was published in 1933 under the alarmist title Our Movie Made Children, written by Henry James Forman. The bad news was that Hollywood - not parents, not the schools, and not the churches—was remaking the next generation of Americans in its own irresponsible, promiscuous image.

In sum, by the spring of 1934, Hollywood faced an intimidating array of hostile armies bivouacked just outside the studio gates: religious (the Legion of Decency), political (the New Deal), and social scientific (the Motion Picture Research Council).

On June 13, 1934, desperate to forestall government censorship, stop the crippling boycotts by the Legion of Decency, and douse the firestorm from educators, the MPPDA recommitted itself to the Production Code and created a new agency with the teeth to enforce its edicts, the Production Code Administration, the name signaling the centrality of the document. Adherence to the principles of the Code would be certified by a Code Seal printed on the title card of each Hollywood film, an emblem that would be the motion picture equivalent of the imprimatur the Vatican stamped on approved books. Studio-affiliated theaters that dared to screen a film without a Code Seal would be fined \$25,000. Only the MPPDA Board in New York could override a decree from the PCA, headquartered on the ground in Hollywood.

To captain the all-important new agency, Hays appointed perhaps the one man equally acceptable to both the studio moguls and the legions of protestors - a redoubtable Victorian Irishman named Joseph I. Breen. Born in Philadelphia in 1888, Breen was a strict Irish Catholic and self-proclaimed soldier in "the Church militant." Before arriving in Hollywood in 1931 as special assistant to Hays, Breen had led a varied career as a big city newspaperman, a counselor officer in Jamaica, a Catholic welfare worker in post - World War I Europe, and a publicity man for the Twenty-eighth Eucharistic Congress, a huge gathering of the Catholic faithful held in Chicago in 1926. Well-traveled and streetwise, the gregarious, energetic, generally congenial but occasionally hot-tempered Breen was the antithesis of the popular stereotype of the hidebound censor, delicate in sensitivities and untouched by the ways of the world. He may have been prudish, he may have been uptight, but he was no dummy and no pushover. "The vulgar, the cheap, and the tawdry is out!" Breen promised moviegoers in a special newsreel appearance ballyhooing the creation of the PCA. "There is no room on the screen at any time for pictures which offend against common decency - and these the industry will not allow."<sup>5</sup> In the nation at large, the PCA was known as the Hays Office, but around Hollywood, a town exquisitely sensitive to the levers of power, it quickly became known as the Breen Office. By all accounts, it was Breen's force of personality, workaholic diligence, and religious devotion to the cause of Catholic-infused self-regulation that made the PCA click as a working operation.

To maximize input and minimize cost, the chosen medium for PCA censorship (or self-regulation) was print, not celluloid. As the PCA files repeatedly verify, neither partner in the shotgun marriage - the regulators or the regulated - wanted trouble to erupt during the unspooling of the film. Censorship was best done in the preproduction "script-review phase" to eliminate the need for costly reshooting and reediting. Ideally, then, the final "print-review" stage undertaken by the Code staff was a pro forma ritual, all problem areas having been ironed out during the meticulous script-review phase. "Certainly, if there is a censorship, it should be done at that time," figured W. R. Wilkerson, the influential editor and publisher of the Hollywood Reporter, speaking for the consensus in 1934. "Once time and money have been expended in production, it is fatal to have that production sliced to ribbons by censors' shears, causing a destruction of thousands of dollars, money that could and would have been saved if the slicing had been done from the script."<sup>6</sup> Before the cameras ever rolled, the fix would be in.

From the PCA's point of view, the script-review phase also meant the Code could function as a more positive and progressive force for shaping the moral content of Hollywood cinema. Any fool can delete nasty words and monitor too-short hemlines. The animating purpose of the Code was to project a moral universe where the guilty are punished, the virtuous are rewarded, the commandments are kept, and the authority of church and state is upheld.

By the end of 1934, with revenues and respectability alike on the rebound, the Code had proven a convenient arrangement all around. Initially, the moguls may have danced to the tune of the Breen Office at gunpoint, but once the Code Seal proved economically and culturally profitable, they wore the emblem as a badge of honor.

A typical day at the PCA began with Breen chairing a morning "huddle" where films were assigned to staff members, potential problem areas were discussed, and memos were drafted and edited. Under Breen, regardless of who actually wrote the PCA prose, each piece of official correspondence to the studios went out over his signature. It hardly mattered: all of the staff channeled Breen's personality and proclivities and all were guided by established practice and interpretations of Code mandates.

After the lengthy and meticulous script-review process (which in controversial cases could involve literally years of negotiation between the Breen Office and the studio), Breen or trusted members of his staff sat down for the final "print-review" stage of the process. Only after eyeballing the final cut of the film, the version that would be released to theaters, would the Code Seal be formally issued. By 1938, according to official estimates by the MPPDA, fully ninety-eight percent of all films playing in American theaters were certified with a Code Seal. Not incidentally, the percentage included pre-Code films rereleased after 1934 with Breen Office approval.

The PCA files reveal a lengthy and exacting process of preproduction review that, depending on the controversy of the project and the personality of the producer, was characterized by a spirit that ranged from friendly give-and-take to angry point-counterpoint. Officially, Breen was the final arbiter whose decisions held the force of law, but as in all business relationships, good faith understandings, wiggle room, and chits exchanged and cashed informed a go-

along-to-get-along ethos. "We were in the business of granting seals," confided the longtime PCA staffer Geoffrey Shurlock in 1970.<sup>7</sup> The PCA was always Hollywood's creature; the Code Seal its protection shield. Perhaps a good way to think of the back-and-forth between the PCA and the studios is as a high-stakes poker game where two cagey cardsharps face off: each player agrees on the rules and knows when to hold, fold, or bluff. If the house - that is, the PCA - always won in the long run, a sly (or double-dealing) producer might still, on occasion, walk away from the table with a few chips or a winning pot.

Significantly, the classic studio era being a time when motion picture directors were hired guns rather than celebrated auteurs, the correspondence between the Breen Office and the studio is typically addressed not to the director, still less to the lowly screenwriter, but to the producer or to a special liaison appointed by the studio to handle the PCA. Often, however, a hands-on producer such as David O. Selznick, Walter Wanger, or Darryl F. Zanuck would take a personal interest in a project and wrestle mano a mano with Breen. For example, in the script-review phase for *Gentleman's Agreement* (1947), the landmark preachment against anti-Semitism, Breen fussed over the implications of premarital intimacy between the romantic leads, Phil (Gregory Peck) and Kathy (Dorothy McGuire). "My dear Joe," Zanuck wrote back wearily, "Phil and Kathy are in love. They will behave on screen as well bred adults behave when they are in love."<sup>8</sup>

Two oft-repeated phrases echo throughout the PCA correspondence: the notion of "compensating moral values," and the guiding principle that films "must be reasonably acceptable to reasonable people." The Breen Office understood that breaking God's commandments was necessary not just for the sake of compelling drama but for the purpose of moral instruction: to show the harsh wages of sin, the sin must also be depicted, or at least implied. Yet the ballast of the sin should never outweigh the weight of the moral compensation. Nor should morality be confused with happiness. Consider the sober messages of Michael Curtiz's *Casablanca* (1942), the classic wartime romance, or Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), the Christmas-season tearjerker: both films are celebrations not of personal happiness but of duty, sacrifice, and, respectively, commitment to the patriotic cause and devotion to family and community. Under the Breen Office, Hollywood cinema need not end happily, but it must end morally.

While upholding the big-picture values, the Breen Office also scoped out the little-picture details. Sheet after sheet of correspondence was generated by silly minutiae and single words: prohibited epithets (hell, damn, nerts to you, hold your hats), toilet humor (Breen evinced an obsessive aversion to bodily processes), and the barest spark of sexual titillation. To keep leering male moviegoers from heating up, the Code mandated a rigorous dress code not only for chorus girls and femme fatales, but all female characters. In his role as fashion policeman, Breen repeatedly cautioned:

*"We direct your particular attention to the need for the greatest possible care in the selection and photographing of the costumes and dresses of your women. The Production Code makes it mandatory that the intimate parts of the body - specifically, the breasts of the women*

*- be fully covered at all times. Any compromise with this regulation will compel us to withhold approval of your picture.*"<sup>9</sup>

Breen was seldom fooled by attempts to wiggle around the lawful corseting of the female form. To assure compliance, studios were asked to submit photographs of actresses in full costume for preapproval. Occasionally, producers would try to sneak a risqué outfit past the examination team with a strategically framed 8x10 photograph, angled to conceal parts of the actress the studio hoped to expose on screen. The sharp-eyed censor would then write back with a request for a photograph from a high-angle perspective—the way the well-endowed ingénue in a low-cut dress would be shot in the film.

The PCA, especially under Breen, had another supervisory role evident throughout the correspondence, the so-called advisory function. Distinct from the power authorized under the Code, the advisory function took the form of words-to-the-wise and disinterested suggestions. You can, under the Code, film the following scenario, but you may run into trouble in Oklahoma, where they don't like excessive drinking, or Chicago, where they don't like insolence towards law enforcement, or the Deep South, where they won't abide any suggestion of racial equality. Breen's expertise in the censorship hurdles erected by different states, cities, and foreign countries, and his advice in helping producers ward off trouble from censors east of Hollywood, expanded his influence exponentially. In practice, his informal advisory function often blurred with his sanctioned authority under the Code.

The Jesuit-educated Breen's cozy relationship with his Catholic kinsmen in the Legion of Decency—his ability to anticipate their theological objections and soothe their suspicions with his mere on-scene presence—gave added weight to his words. After all, PCA or no PCA, the Legion still evaluated films on its own private grading scale: A (morally unobjectionable), B (objectionable in part for all), and the most dreaded grade, the scarlet letter of C (condemned), a film that no good Catholic could patronize. The Breen Office files are replete with examples of the Legion's back-channel input and postproduction influence on Hollywood cinema.

After World War II, the PCA files reflect a discernable uptick in recalcitrance and resistance on the part of the studios: America had changed but the Code had not. Two genres born of war and proliferating in the postwar era were especially corrosive to the foundations of the regime. The social-problem film tackled a range of heretofore radioactive topics—mental illness, physical disabilities, alcoholism, anti-Semitism, and, most controversially, racism—with what was, for the time, a startling explicitness, nowhere more jarringly than in the blunt hearing given ethnic and racial slurs on the dialogue track. Even more subversive of the moral universe of the PCA were the dark tones and harsh fatalism of the film noir. More and more, Code staffers found themselves flinching before the brutality, physical and psychic, that wafted through the atmosphere of the genre like the omnipresent cigarette smoke. Ironically, however, the most notorious postwar challenge to the authority of the PCA came from the unlikely regions of the western. The PCA file on Howard Hughes's busty frontier saga The Outlaw (1943) tracks a purgatorial travail for Joseph Breen that lasted for over a decade.



Co-conspiring with the challenges on the domestic front was a cinematic invasion from overseas—first, the full flowering of Italian neorealism, and soon foreign masterpieces from France, Sweden, and Japan, films that often eschewed a Code Seal and played in a burgeoning "art house" market outside the provenance of the MPAA. Unexpectedly, however, foreign cinema made its most dramatic stateside impact not on the exhibition circuit but on a document that possessed greater authority than even the Production Code. In 1952, in a case involving an Italian import, The Miracle, the Supreme Court reversed its 1915 opinion and granted the art of cinema its first protection under the U.S. Constitution.

In 1954 an ailing Breen retired from the post he had commanded for twenty years, his departure ending American Catholicism's vice grip on Hollywood cinema. To succeed Breen, MPAA president Eric Johnston appointed Geoffrey Shurlock, an amiable Episcopalian who had served the cause of self-regulation since 1932, first at the Studio Relations Committee and later at the PCA as Breen's right-hand man. Unlike Breen, who solidified and extended the PCA regime, Shurlock was destined to preside over an extended rear-guard action, a long retreat that ultimately ended in total surrender.

Shurlock had no choice but to bend with the times and take a more open-minded approach to self-regulation. Otto Preminger's The Moon Is Blue (1953) had already proven that a Hollywood production could turn a profit in defiance both of the PCA, which denied it the once-obligatory Code Seal, and the Legion of Decency, which tagged it with its once-lethal C-for-condemned rating. The old concept of punishment for sin needed to be "modernized in harmony with common sense and sound psychological dicta," Shurlock declared in 1955, promising that "as producers become interested in more stimulating and trailblazing stories, the Code will help them find more penetrating and solid methods of treating them."<sup>10</sup>

However, in order to be more stimulating and trailblazing, the Code had to be revised and edited. The text of the Code had never been totally inviolate—over the years, amendments and resolutions of the MPAA had expanded and tinkered around the edges with the original copy—but on December 11, 1956, the MPAA approved a major revision, rescinding the flat bans on illegal drugs, abortion, white slavery, and kidnapping. Thereafter, almost on a film-by-film basis, the later half of the 1950s traces compromise after compromise as previously forbidden words, images, and subject matter leaked in dribs and drabs onto the Hollywood screen.

By the 1960s, the formerly ironclad contract of the PCA had rusted into a porous sheet. Films such as Alfred Hitchcock's Psycho (1960) and The Birds (1963), Elia Kazan's Splendor in the Grass (1961), and Billy Wilder's The Apartment (1960) and Kiss Me, Stupid (1964) trafficked in the kind of moral disorientation, explicit imagery, and open transgression that only a few years before would never have earned a Code Seal. "There are now no taboos on subject matter," Shurlock admitted in 1963. "Movies have changed with the changes of civilization."<sup>11</sup>

In 1966 the new president of the MPAA, Jack Valenti, was determined to junk a system that filmmakers, critics, and most audiences found as dusty, antiquated, and remote as the Great Depression decade that spawned it. The two films that confirmed the terminal prognosis were The Pawnbroker (1965) and Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf (1966), denied Code Seals by

Shurlock for prohibited images and language, respectively. In both cases, Shurlock's decision was overruled by the MPAA Board in New York.

In 1968, ineffectual and infirm, defunct in all but name, the PCA was formally supplanted by the Code and Rating Administration (CARA, after 1978 the Classification and Rating Administration). Unlike the PCA, CARA rated rather than regulated the Hollywood product line, awarding letter grades (ultimately the familiar G, PG, PG-13, R, and NC-17 age-appropriate calibrations) and providing only the briefest of commentary typeset in a rectangular box included on one-sheets, media advertising, and screen trailers: "language," "sexual content," "explicit violence," and so on.

Today, few moviegoers lament the passing of the Production Code Administration, the most draconian mechanism for the censorship of American cinema ever devised. From a scholarly vantage, however, a felicitous legacy of the regime that shaped the contours of Hollywood cinema for more than three decades is the paperwork record of its editorial process. The PCA files, a generous and representative sampling of which is collected in the former microfilm project and now in this digital collection, are cue sheets marking the history shared by Hollywood and America. In granting backstage access to the inner workings of the motion picture industry, they also offer a unique index to the morals and manners of the American people during the wrenching social upheavals of the Great Depression, the bracing challenges of World War II, the tensions of the Cold War, and the turbulence of the 1960s. More than a blueprint to the studio system production line, the files chronicle the ebb and flow of race relations, sexual mores, gender roles, freedom of expression, the tug of tradition, and the lure of the new.

Sifting through the PCA files, cultural historians of every stripe will find a treasure trove of enlightening material: story and script reviews, interoffice memos, cross-country telegrams, studio correspondence, scrawled marginal commentary, trade-press clippings, letters from average moviegoers, and a telephone directory's worth of famous credit lines writing the PCA in tones humble, appreciative, confused, and furious. Of course, since the paper trail cannot eavesdrop on deals made during conversations in studio commissaries or shouting matches in screening rooms, the wise researcher will do well to read between the lines (and under and around them). Yet whatever the gaps in the archival backstory, the files that follow offer a privileged insight, once reserved for above-the-line eyes only, into the nuts-and-bolts construction of classic Hollywood cinema.

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*Collection Overview*

In 1983 the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) donated the records of the Production Code Administration (PCA) to the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences' Margaret Herrick Library in Beverly Hills, California. This remarkable collection, which

documents forty years of self-regulation and censorship in the motion picture industry, contains detailed case files for nearly twenty thousand film projects that were submitted to the Production Code staff for consideration. The collection was first made available to researchers in early 1984, and since then has become the library's most frequently studied archival collection. Film scholars from around the world have consulted the files, and numerous books, articles, and dissertations have been based on the information that researchers have discovered in the various documents that are archived in this unique collection.

While most of the MPAA Production Code Administration files relate to films produced between 1930 and 1968, when the Production Code was in effect, the collection also includes several hundred files for films reviewed by the Studio Relations Committee between 1927 and 1929, and a small number of files for films released after 1968. The five hundred titles selected for microfilming and included in this digital collection were chosen by the staff of the library's Special Collections Department, with advice from film historian Leonard J. Leff. These files span the years 1927 to 1968, and are arranged in chronological order by year of release. The selection includes films from every studio and genre, as well as examples of important foreign productions and independently made films. Although the complete collection includes information on hundreds of projects that were proposed but never completed, none of those files were selected. Every effort was made to include the most well-known films from the period, but certain frequently requested titles could not be included because the library did not receive the files from the MPAA. These include Freaks, King Kong, Gunga Din, The Letter, and Citizen Kane, as well as numerous other films released before July 1934.

The Production Code Administration files document the self-regulation process from the first submission of a script, play, or literary property to the final approval of the finished film. The core of the files is the correspondence between the studios or producers and the staffs of the PCA and the MPAA. However, the files are also filled with letters to and from theater owners, censor boards, religious organizations, government entities, and other special interest groups that were concerned with the content of motion pictures. The PCA also regularly received letters from viewers expressing opinions about particular films, but that correspondence is generally not found in the case files. Clearly, there were other file series at the PCA offices and, if they were saved, the letters from viewers were most likely stored there.

In addition to the correspondence with studios, producers, and organizations, the PCA files also include many interoffice communications, including telegrams, memoranda, and meeting notes. These were sometimes written by the PCA staff for internal use in the Hollywood office, but in many more cases were from Will Hays or members of the staff in the New York office of the MPAA. In the 1930s, there was a separate Code staff in New York that handled foreign imports and films produced on the East Coast, so those case files in particular contain a great deal of correspondence between the two offices. The Advertising Code staff and the Title Registration Bureau were also located in New York, and the files sometimes include exchanges with these departments.

Although most of the correspondence in the files relates to the content of screenplays, the files do not contain the actual scripts that were submitted for evaluation. However, many of the files do include other types of literary materials, such as stories, synopses, reader's reports, and treatments. In addition, producers were required to submit all song lyrics to the PCA for scrutiny and possible revision, and as a result the files illustrate the work of virtually every lyricist working in Hollywood and on Broadway during this time period. Another facet of the PCA's work was the approval of certain female costumes. Over the years, the office must have received thousands of wardrobe photographs for review (many of them from Twentieth Century-Fox, which was particularly concerned about having costumes preapproved), but in most cases those photographs were not filed with the related correspondence. Files selected do contain wardrobe photographs and include Belle Starr, The Chapman Report, The Gang's All Here, Gentlemen Prefer Blondes, Lady in the Dark, and Stormy Weather.

The PCA files also include articles and reviews from newspapers, magazines, and trade publications; confidential reports from state and national censor boards; and, beginning in 1934, a copy of the official Code certificate letter. After 1937, most of the files also include an analysis sheet, a form that breaks down the characters and components in the films and also provides a synopsis of the story. While these forms can be interesting, researchers should note that they were completed during the screening of the finished film, and there is no indication that these analysis sheets had anything to do with whether a motion picture was approved and given a Production Code Seal. In all likelihood, the analysis sheet was devised by the MPAA in order to collect statistical information on the content of the films being submitted to the PCA, perhaps to help counter protests by special interest groups.

The files that were compiled by the clerks at the PCA were housed in legal-size folders with large two-pronged clips at the top. With this filing system, items were two-hole punched and added to the file as they were received. As a result, the materials ended up in the file in reverse chronological order. Generally, the right side of the folder was used for correspondence and memos, and the left side for censorship reports. The office staff also clipped and filed film reviews, which were stapled to sheets of paper and added to the right side of the file after the release of the film. Since receiving the collection, the library staff has removed the materials from the original folders and transferred them into acid-free archival folders. The correspondence and memos are now in chronological order; the final items in each file are the film reviews, which have been unstapled and photocopied, and the censorship reports.

Researchers interested in the workings of the Production Code Administration will undoubtedly note that much of the official correspondence sent out by the PCA was signed by Joseph Breen or his successor, Geoffrey Shurlock. This practice began on a smaller scale with the Studio Relations Committee heads Jason Joy and James Wingate, and was formalized by Breen when he took over in 1934. Under Breen, staff members were assigned scripts to read and evaluate and, after meeting with Breen and the rest of the staff, they would then write the letters that were sent to the studios over Breen's signature. This system allowed the PCA to present a united front, and may have been designed to forestall lobbying by the studios for readers they felt were more receptive to certain themes. The individual

reviewers can be identified by their numbers, which were assigned to them when they joined the staff and which can usually be found near the bottom of the page next to the secretary's initials. Some of the longtime staff members whose letters are often found in the files include Geoffrey M. Shurlock (2), Islin Auster (3), Carl Lischka (4), Charles R. Metzger (8), Harry H. Zehner (10), T. A. Lynch (12), Jack Vizzard (14), Eugene Dougherty (15), and Albert E. Van Schmus (17). Shurlock continued this practice when he succeeded Breen in 1954, and it was used until the Production Code was replaced in 1968 by the film ratings system.

It is fortunate that when the Production Code was eclipsed by the ratings system the MPAA made the decision to hold on to the office's files, and eventually agreed to donate them to a library where they would be made available to researchers. Now, with this microform publication, even more students and scholars will have the opportunity to study the intricate workings of this system that had such a profound influence not only on the American motion picture industry and the films it produced, but also on several generations of movie audiences.

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### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Mutual Film Corporation v. Industrial Commission of Ohio, 236 U.S. 230 (1915).

<sup>2</sup> Father Lord relates his version of the creation of the PCA in his memoir, *Played by Ear: The Autobiography of Daniel A. Lord, S.J.* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1955): 303-305.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel A. Lord, S.J., "Production Code: A Product of the Industry," *Motion Picture Herald*, November 23, 1946: 22. Reprinted from Father Lord's letter, *Hollywood Reporter*, November 8, 1946.

<sup>4</sup> Jack Vizzard, *See No Evil: Life Inside a Hollywood Censor* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970): 39, 40.

<sup>5</sup> "Motion Picture Official Explains Code," *Universal Newsreel* 6, no. 282, September 5, 1934.

<sup>6</sup> W.R. Wilkerson, "Tradeviews," *Hollywood Reporter*, January 5, 1935: 1.

<sup>7</sup> James M. Wall, "Interviews with Geoffrey Shurlock," *Oran history*, Louis B. Mayer Library, American Film Institute, Los Angeles, 1970: 261.

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Breen to Jason Joy, March 21, 1947; Darryl F Zanuck to Joseph Breen, March 27, 1947. Gentleman's Agreement file, MPAA Production Code Administration Files, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph Breen to Jason Joy, July 21, 1950. David and Bathsheba file. MPAA Production Code Administration Files, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

<sup>10</sup> "New Wages of Sin: Remorse," *Variety*, April 25, 1956: 7, 22.

<sup>11</sup> "Inside Stuff-Pictures," *Variety*, October 2, 1963: 30.