



Sheri Chinen Biesen. *Film Censorship: Regulating America's Screen.* Short Cuts Series. London: Wallflower Press, 2018. Illustrations. vii + 163 pp. \$22.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-231-18313-0.

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Throughout much of the twentieth century, motion pictures were systematically subjected to wide-ranging efforts to control the images and messages delivered to American audiences on the big screen. Religious and civic leaders, and movie studio executives themselves, were especially sensitive to portrayals of criminal activity, sex, immorality, and situations that challenged accepted norms for race and gender. In her new book, *Film Censorship: Regulating America's Screen*, Sheri Chinen Biesen examines some of the more prominent mechanisms for governing film content. The book stretches from the earliest attempts at censorship of film—a state-driven ban on boxing movies in the late nineteenth century—through the introduction of the ratings system in the late 1960s. It is geared toward an introductory film studies program and is one of the many titles included in the Short Cuts series of Wallflower Press.

Early on, the industry faced sporadic attempts at the local and state levels to control the display of salacious movies and advertising. However, by the 1920s, censorship was largely self-imposed. Much as early broadcasters aired public affairs programming as a strategic bulwark against government regulation, the motion picture industry invented a regulatory regime to avoid having one created for them. As Biesen points out, “Wary of direct government regulation of films, and in an ef-

fort to counteract bad publicity, public outrage and investigations, and avoid state, regional and federal censorship, the film industry established the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) trade organization and hired Will Hays, a former Postmaster General, Presbyterian elder and campaign manager for President Warren Harding, as MPPDA president to improve the image of Hollywood in 1922” (pp. 12-13). This industry oversight of permissible and forbidden content was complemented, Biesen notes, by an early ratings system administered by the Catholic Legion of Decency.

Most of this slim book focuses on the period from 1930, when the Motion Picture Production Code was established, to 1968, when the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) adopted a ratings system. Biesen, a film professor and historian who has written extensively on the 1940s and 1950s film noir era, consulted archival collections including those at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Library in Beverly Hills, California, and the MPPDA Digital Archive. Biesen also used news reports from such publications as *Variety* and the *New York Times*, and made extensive use of advertising posters and movie promotional photographs to illustrate her narrative. Her primary research is supplemented by the work of numer-

ous film scholars, such as Thomas Doherty, Leonard Leff, Gregory Black, and Clayton Koppes.

Biesen notes that the major studios agreed to a morally strict production code in 1930 dealing with crime, sex, violence, and other issues. “Conceptually,” she writes, “the intrinsic assumption of the Production Code was based on the notion that screen entertainment had the potential to improve or degrade the screen viewing public’s life” (p. 17). The so-called Hays Office was charged with enforcing the code, and in 1934 it hired Joseph Breen as the chief censor. Studio executives were expected to submit scripts to Breen’s office, with the understanding that unacceptable material would be cut or the film would be denied a seal of approval, which was necessary for films to be shown in first-run movie houses. Indeed, the self-censorship effort was effective because the major studios also owned more than three-fourths of the first-run theaters in major urban areas. The code led to negotiations over language, scenes, or characters, with Breen imposing demands on studios while withholding approval.

Also in 1934, the Catholic Church established the Legion of Decency, which grew to have millions of faithful members. The legion “pledged to boycott and blacklist films with ‘morally offensive’ content labeled ‘indecent’ by the church” (p. 35). The legion established its own system of review, negotiation, and classification of moral fitness. Indeed, as Black argues in *The Catholic Crusade against the Movies, 1940-1975* (1997), the legion was launched out of dissatisfaction with the industry’s efforts to regulate content.

The net effect of the code and fear of being condemned by the Catholic Church was a toning down of violence and sexual situations in the later 1930s. However, although the code existed until 1968, its heyday was short and its power was always subject to the willingness of the industry to embrace the cover it provided. Biesen notes that studio heads were adept at negotiating to get a seal of approval by arguing the artistic merits of such

films as *Gone with the Wind* (1939) and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1940).

Beginning in 1942, the federal government became directly involved in oversight of film production through the Office of War Information (OWI). As Koppes and Black argue in *Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics, Profits and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies* (1987), government officials were convinced that movies could shape public opinion related to the war. OWI officials sat in on story conferences with Hollywood executives, reviewed screenplays, issued manuals on how to help the war effort, pressured moviemakers to change scripts and scrap projects, and wrote dialogue.

Biesen notes that *The Outlaw* (1943), a Howard Hughes production that featured a provocatively dressed Jane Russell, actually benefited from a highly public fight in 1946 with local authorities and against the MPAA’s advertising guidelines. Publicity photos of Russell, such as the one on the cover of Biesen’s book, only served to promote the film. “In spite of—or rather because of—the film’s controversy with Hollywood industry and state/local censors, *The Outlaw* ultimately broke box-office records” (p. 82). Even in 1944, Biesen argues, the release of *Double Indemnity*, in which an insurance salesman played by Fred MacMurray participates in a murder-for-money scheme with Barbara Stanwyck, demonstrated the code office was loosening the bounds of acceptable dialogue and plot.

In fact, by the time the war was over, the code, and ultimately the moral authority of the legion, was challenged on a number of fronts. Servicemen and servicewomen had participated in a real-life bloody conflict, and the United States had dropped two atomic bombs, making concerns about violence on the screen seem trite. Hays of the MPPDA was replaced by another public relations man, Eric Johnston, the pragmatic former head of the US Chamber of Commerce, and the organization was renamed the Motion Picture Association of America. The House Committee on Un-American Activi-

ties held hearings in 1947 that led to the blacklisting of Hollywood actors, screenwriters, and directors. Then in 1948, the major studios lost an antitrust battle in *United States v. Paramount Pictures* that forced the disintegration of the system that allowed movie studios to control production, distribution, and exhibition of films. Independent producers “no longer worried about the Code Seal of Approval because they were not under the studio system’s vertical integration of studio theaters” (p. 89). As if that were not enough pain for the industry, communities were sprawling outward, away from the urban movie palaces described by Douglas Gomery in *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States* (1992); television was introduced as an alternative to moviegoing; and *Playboy*, launched in 1953, helped redefine permissible sexual content. Four years later, the Supreme Court ruled in *Roth v. United States* that sexually explicit material was protected by the First Amendment.

By the 1960s, a host of films were produced under MPAA scrutiny with subjects, characters, scenes, and language that would have been unthinkable a generation earlier. Biesen notes that in a span of just a few years Hollywood producers created *Dr. Strangelove* (1964), *The Pawnbroker* (1965), *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1966), *The Graduate* (1967), and *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967). As Leff notes in his 1980 essay, “A Test of American Film Censorship,” *Virginia Woolf* may have been the final act for the Production Code Administration (PCA), which insisted that the script was unacceptable.[1] Warner Brothers refused to alter the script, which was based on the highly acclaimed Broadway play by Edward Albee, and new MPAA head Jack Valenti convinced the board to grant a seal of approval on literary merit, but for adults only.

Indeed, in 1968 the MPAA created the Code and Ratings Administration and adopted a new system of classification that merely sought to alert audiences to the content of the movie so adults could

make informed judgments about what was appropriate for children to see. This system, with a few minor modifications, remains in place today. It continues to be self-administered, and as with the PCA, movie producers quickly came to understand how to game the system. Stephen Vaughn argues in *Freedom and Entertainment: Rating the Movies in an Age of New Media* (2006) that the ratings were a positive development for film artists, as content decisions came to be based on economic considerations, not moralistic ones. Disputes were not over whether a movie could include a certain scene or topic but whether it should receive one rating or another, something that affected box-office value and the theaters that would show it, not whether the movie could be made.

On the whole, Biesen has squeezed a lot of information into 123 pages. Indeed, if anything, the book suffers from being too short. Despite a strong argument for contextualization in the introduction and the epilogue, the body of the book feels a bit heavy on details—a list of names and dates of films with public statements or correspondence from the MPPDA and studio executives—and a little light on why this oversight regime developed and functioned the way it did. However, Biesen accomplishes what the Short Cuts series set out to do. Using this book as a foundation, instructors offering good lectures and excerpts from some of the films listed in the book could provide a meaningful introduction to censorship and the movie industry.

Note

[1]. Leonard J. Leff, “A Test of American Film Censorship: Who’s Afraid of Virginia Wolf?” *Cinema Journal* 19, no. 2 (Spring 1980): 41-55.

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