**Video Script**

**Lecture 13 – The Production Code**

**Fall 2020**

**Welcome**

As I’m sure you’ve figure out by now from context clues, the Production Code was a set of rules that put an end to the violent, sexy spectacle of pre-Code cinema—a type of filmmaking, remember, that grew out of the need to lure people back to theaters during the Great Depression.

Today, I want to look at how the Production Code came to be. It wasn’t a simple matter of cause and effect, but a potent combination of advocacy, research, religion, and scandal that led to change.

**Key Concepts**

Here are your key concepts for this lecture.

**Media Effects**

It’s hard to understand why the Production Code came about without first understanding the concept of *media effects*. The fancy definition of media effects is **[ANIMATION]:**

*Social or psychological responses occurring in individuals, small groups, organizations, or communities as a result of exposure to, or processing of, or otherwise acting on media messages.*

Let’s decode that. The idea of media effects is really a simple one. It’s the idea that the media you watch acts upon you in some way. It changes you.

The study of media effects, or how media changes people, and the field of communication as a whole, arose in the 1920s because of two things: 1) All of a sudden, there were these new forms of mass media. We’d had things like newspapers for a long time, but the relatively simultaneous distribution of motion pictures across the country left people wondering how movies were affecting them. And believe it or not, number two is WWI. During WWI, people saw how effective political propaganda was. They were concerned that media might be persuading people to believe things much in the same way propaganda did.

**[ANIMATION**] It’s also important to know that despite studying media effects since the 1920s, there’s no clear-cut answers about how media affects audiences. There have been lots of theories, though. At first, people thought media might act on us like a hypodermic needle, injecting new thoughts directly into our brain. That was followed by a more limited effects model, which said that maybe people in our lives tempered or amplified media messages.

That was followed by another model called uses and gratifications, followed by another model called encoding/decoding, and on and on and on. You’ll talk more about media effects in RTF 307: Media and Society, so I don’t want to go *too* far into this.

For the purposes of our class today, what I want to think about is how people *worry* about the effects of media—that it’s *harming* vulnerable members of our communities.

**Moral Panic**

Sometimes that fear escalates into what sociologist Stanley Cohen calls a moral panic. He says moral panics generally unfold in five phases.

**[ANIMATION]** First, something is defined as a threat—often to populations seen as vulnerable, like children or women.

**[ANIMATION]** Then, that threat is boiled down into a simple and recognizable image. So, the panic has a symbol.

**[ANIMATION]** Then, that image is disseminated by the media in ways that arouse public concern.

**[ANIMATION]** Authorities like politicians, law enforcement, or even teachers and/or parents, issue some kind of a response. This could be anything from enacting a new law to banning a particular toy in schools.

**[ANIMATION]** In time, the moral panic passes but the changes stay in place. Let’s look at a couple of examples.

**[ANIMATION]** Just to show we’ve been panicking about media effects for a long time, I wanted to start with an old example. In the 18th century, people were very concerned about the effect of too much novel reading on women. This was such a common fear that a female writer put a satirical character in her 1778 novel who espoused these views. She wrote him as saying “Women of every age, of every condition, contract and retain a taste for novels. The depravity is universal. My sight is everywhere offended by these foolish, yet dangerous books”

Panic about the effect of novels extended to all impressionable young people when Goethe published *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. This book was the *Thirteen Reasons Why* of 1774. The main character commits suicide, young folks *loved* the book, and thus people were terrified that the novel would make young people kill themselves. Reports of men dressed as Werther threatening suicide with Werther’s pistol spread. Countries banned the book. The city of Leipzig even banned Werther-style clothing!

**Moral Panic (continued)**

Not all moral panics are based on media. Here’s a fun one! **[ANIMATION]** People used to be terrified of women running marathons. Panic in the modern era resulted from erroneous media reports during the 1928 Olympics that women collapsed, near dead, after the 800-meter event. Women were mostly banned from track events from that point until the 1970s—particularly marathons, because doctors feared all that running would make their *uteruses fall out*. For real. That was something people were concerned about!

In this instance, the image of the woman collapsing on the track became the symbol for panic about women’s bodies, and the dissemination of this symbolic image resulted in decades of rules that banned them from running competitions.

**Moral Panic (continued)**

In the 20th and 21st centuries, we’ve panicked about how all of the following things are harming kids: the radio, comic books, jazz, heavy metal, rap, Dungeons and Dragons, video games, Harry Potter, social media, screen time, rainbow-colored rubber bracelets, Halloween candy, and just about anything else under the sun. In terms of a recent-ish example, let us gaze for a moment upon my friend and yours, **[ANIMATION]** Momo.

The Momo urban legend has all the hallmarks of a classic moral panic. I’ll link you in the module to a pitch-perfect fearmongering local news story as well as a more in-depth article from *The Atlantic.*

**Fatty Arbuckle**

**S**ome people were suspicious about the morality of movies right from the get-go, in the early 20th century. Remember, the movies are dark, they’re cheap, kids can go alone to do god knows what with and to each other, and all of those fears are amplified by issues of class and nativism. If the movies are cheap and full of immigrants, that line of thinking went, were they really *respectable?*

Still, most people embraced the movies, and they embraced the actor in these gifs. This is Roscoe “Fatty” Arbuckle, which is the cool kind of nickname we used to give human beings with human feelings, I guess. Arbuckle was a beloved star of one-reel comedies in the 1910s and his presence was almost like a Chris Farley, if you know who he was. Arbuckle was a big guy who did very agile physical comedy—the seeming incongruity of his size and his gracefulness was was box office gold.

He was powerful in the industry, too. He discovered our pal Buster Keaton and gave him his first jobs in the movie business. By 1918, Arbuckle was raking in a million dollars per year. That’s *staggering* in terms of 1920s money.

**Virginia Rappe**

In 1921, Arbuckle and some of his friends rent out some hotel rooms in San Francisco to hold a Labor Day party. A bunch of models/actresses/starlets show up, including the woman you see here, Virginia Rappe.

**Hotel room**

What happens next is unclear. Despite it being Prohibition, there was certainly drinking. There was certainly partying. There was certainly some trashing of some hotel rooms, as celebrities are wont to do. And at some point Rappe was alone in a room with Arbuckle.

**Mugshot**

She dies a few days later. Her official cause of death is peritonitis from a ruptured bladder.

Arbuckle is arrested. The rumor mill goes to work.

**Headlines**

**[ANIMATION]** The party is called an orgy. **[ANIMATION]** People say he assaulted her with a coke bottle. **[ANIMATION]** People say that he crushed her. **[ANIMATION]** There are procedural irregularities with Rappe’s autopsy so it’s almost impossible to know what really happened. **[ANIMATION x 2]** But the scandal is front page news and the more salacious the headline, the more copies the papers sell.

**Headlines (continued)**

Arbuckle is tried *three times* in 1922. There’s a hung jury, a mistrial, and ultimately he was acquitted of all wrongdoing.

**Courtroom**

The damage, however, is done. Given public opinion, the studios abandon him. Arbuckle finds a little bit of work here and there directing films under a pseudonym, but it isn’t until a full decade later, in 1932, that he’s offered any on-camera acting work. He stars in two successful shorts. The day he signs a deal with Warner Brothers for a feature film, he dies in his sleep.

**Hollywood**

Writer and Hollywood historian Anne Helen Petersen helps connect Fatty Arbuckle to the idea of the moral panic we were talking about a few slides ago. Through media coverage of the scandal, Arbuckle became a *symbol* of everything morally suspect about Hollywood. Petersen says, “Arbuckle was acquitted of all wrong-doing in the eyes of the law. But the court of public opinion had made its decision before the first trial even began: Arbuckle was guilty. Perhaps of violating a young woman, but definitely of being too much — too big, too rich, too tasteless. He became the symbol for Hollywood excess — physical, monetary — writ large.”

I think what she means is that Arbuckle came to stand for the whole seedy underbelly of Hollywood. He represented how old money rich people feared movie stars and their new money suddenly jumping classes. He also represented unsettled questions about media effects. Would all the little kids who loved Fatty films turn out to be like him?

I will link you to her piece if you want to read more of her totally fascinating analysis.

**What happened after?**

Now, it should be said that Arbuckle wasn’t the only Hollywood scandal in the early 1920s. There was also the unsolved murder of director William Desmond Taylor, and the death of a young dreamboat actor named Wallace Reid from a heroin overdose. There was a sense in some quarters that Hollywood was full of drunks, creeps, criminals, and nymphomaniacs. The Arbuckle trial simply put that feeling on the front page.

So, what happened afterwards?

**[ANIMATION]** First, people grew more worried about the effects of media on children, and they began to study it more “scientifically.” Feel the air quotes when I say that—you’ll see why in a minute.

**[ANIMATION]** Second, religious groups began organizing against motion pictures they saw as morally bankrupt.

**[ANIMATION]** And third, the movie industry began to offer its own solutions.

**Payne Fund**

Let’s start with the kiddos, and a series of experiments called the Payne Fund studies. **[ANIMATION].** These were a set of scientific studies run between 1929 and 1932, organized by Reverend William Short, a religious/moral reformer. And while the studies were run out of premiere universities across the country, like Yale and the University of Chicago, Short began the project *already sure* that the movies are bad for children. He was looking *only* for evidence that supported his position.

So, behavioral scientists use all kinds of new-fangled 1920s techniques to experiment on kids. They plop them in front of movies and hook them up to heart rate monitors and psychogalvanometers—a.k.a. devices that measure skin responses like sweating. They study whether tooth-brushing movies make kids brush their teeth more. They study whether kids who go to the movies a lot do okay in school. They ask adults to record their memories of going to the movies when they were little.

But at the end of the day, the results were gathered and published in 1933 as a polemic (or an argument) not as science. Take, for example, the sleep study. Scientists wired up a bunch of kids’ beds to track movement, showed one group of kids movies before bedtime and not the rest, and then monitored their sleep patterns. What did they find? Well, that children who watched movies before bed actually *slept more soundly* than children who didn’t.

What would you conclude from that? That movies aren’t detrimental to children’s sleep, right?

Sure, but if you’re Hollywood-hating Reverend William Short and you want to put a stop to all this morally bankrupt movie watching, you conclude in your summary report that children….um…*should be tossing and turning more*! Yeah, that’s it! Movie-watching is keeping kids from doing *all of this medically critical tossing and turnin*g.

**Legion of Decency**

Response number two to indecency in Hollywood a loose organization of Catholics called the *Legion of Decency*, which sounds like the worst Marvel movie ever made.

**Encyclical**

The legion was founded in 1933—so, some time after the Arbuckle scandals, but during the era of salacious pre-Code films. They organized through churches and leveraged the threat of boycott to encourage the movie studios to make cleaner films. With 20 million practicing Catholics among the US moviegoing public, this is a big threat! Here’s the Legion of Decency oath. Everyone raise your right hands and repeat after me:

*“I condemn all indecent and immoral motion pictures, and those which glorify crime or criminals. I promise to do all that I can to strengthen public opinion against the production of indecent and immoral films, and to unite with all who protest against them. I acknowledge my obligation to form a right conscience about pictures that are dangerous to my moral life. I pledge myself to remain away from them. I promise, further, to stay away altogether from places of amusement which show them as a matter of policy.”*

In 1934, the Pope issues an encyclical (a long statement) about the movies. He highlights the dangers of the movies, saying:

*“Now then, it is a certainty which can readily be verified that the more marvellous the progress of the motion picture art and industry, the more pernicious and deadly has it shown itself to morality and to religion and even to the very decencies of human society.”*

Here, the Pope is talking about—say it with me—*MEDIA EFFECTS*. He’s saying that the more amazing films are, the more they can corrupt us!

**Ratings**

The Legion begins issuing ratings and circulating those ratings to Catholics. C films are absolutely unacceptable—C stands for *condemned*. B pictures are morally objectionable in part, so, not recommended. A films are unobjectionable—they won’t endanger your soul—but they are broken down into age-based categories.

Does this rating system look familiar to you? It should. We’ll talk more about how it forms the basis of the MPA rating system in a few weeks.

**The Production Code**

And finally, we get to Hollywood’s own response. And that response is led **[ANIMATION]** by the man being greeted by this banner, one Will Hays. He was the person brought in to clean up the movie industry lest the government do it.

**Kenesaw Mountain Landis**

There was a precedent to appointing a man like Will Hays to a position like this. Following the Black Sox betting scandal of 1919, the reputation of American baseball was deeply damaged. In order to regain the public’s trust, federal judge and great name-haver Kenesaw Mountain Landis was brought in as the sport’s first commissioner. The impression such a move gives is okay, we’re serious, we want to shape up, and you can trust us with your precious ticket dollars again.

**Will H. Hays**

The man Hollywood brought in to clean up shop was cut from a similar cloth as Landis. **[ANIMATION]** Hays was the former chair of the Republican National Committee

**[ANIMATION]** He had also served as the Postmaster General, a position recent news events has really highlighted. The Postmaster General is not only a trusted position—the mail is a critical public service—but in the 1920s it also had sort of a morality component due to the Comstock laws. The Comstock laws made it illegal to mail things like pornography, sex toys, or birth control. Hays as Postmaster General was already in the business of keeping things above board.

**[ANIMATION]** So, in 1922, Will Hays becomes the head of the MPPDA, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America. This is a trade organization that represents the major film studios.

**Cartoon**

Hays comes to Hollywood in 1922 facing two *major* issues. The first is public’s impression that Hollywood was a den of iniquity following the Arbuckle trials. Here, in this cartoon, you see Will Hays about to dive into a swirling sea to save the movie industry. The miasma is labeled things like “murder,” “Arbuckle,” “vice,” “film scandal,” and my favorite, “dope parties.” One of his first acts as the head of the MPPDA is to ban Fatty Arbuckle from appearing in films. He also begins advising studios to add morality clauses to actor contracts, which sought to control their off-screen behavior.

The second major issue Hays has to face is the threat of federal censorship of movies. In the 1920s, many cities and states had local censorship boards that decided what films could be shown in their jurisdiction. These small bodies could be sweet-talked, to some degree. But after all of this bad press, Hollywood was terrified that the federal government would begin meddling in their business. And while the Production Code that Hays eventually develops gets a bad rap for limiting what films could say, there was the real sense at the time that he was saving the industry.

**[ANIMATION]** A few years into his job, Hays issued a document called the “Don’t’s and Be Carefuls.” It’s a short list of things films shouldn’t show. Some seem very retrograde today—the idea that you couldn’t say “god” or “lord” in a movie seems pretty limiting. On the other hand, this also says you can’t show children’s private parts, and I think we can all agree that’s a good thing!

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**Quigley & Lord**

The issue with the 1927 “Don’t’s and Be Carefuls” is that there’s no way to enforce it. It makes Hays look like he’s trying to clean things up, but we know that once the Depression starts to eat into studios’ business, this all goes *right* out the window.

Enter Martin Quigley, editor of the movie magazine *Motion Picture Herald* and devout Catholic, and Fr. Daniel Lord, a Jesuit priest. Hays asks these two to produce a new set of rules, and what emerges is the Production Code of 1930—which is also known as the Hays Code. The code mostly fleshes out the Don’t’s and Be Carefuls and it frames them within an overarching sense of morality. The takeaway from the Production Code of 1930 is that *films should avoid sin, because they might lead people to sin.* They *affect* us.

This is neither here nor there, but I’ve produced thirteen lectures so far this semester and I’m beginning to lose touch with reality. All I see when I look at this picture of Martin Quigley and *some* unnamed actor is **[ANIMATION]** Ghostbusters-era Dan Akroyd and 1980s one-hit wonder Taco, singer of “Puttin’ on the Ritz.” No? Just me? I need a nap? Gotcha.

**Production Code**

You’ll read through the Production Code as part of today’s module, but let’s emphasize a few of its main points.

No obvious or overt violence

No sex or nudity

No suggestive dancing

No prolonged kissing (no more than 2 seconds)

No swearing

No pregnancy or childbirth

No sex workers

No drugs

No excessive alcohol

No “white slavery” (an older term for sex trafficking – regular slavery was *just fine*)  
No miscegenation

No illustrating how crimes are committed

No bad guys winning

No national or religious prejudice

**Joseph Breen**

So, the Hays Code (Production Code) is written in 1930. But the reason the violent, sexy pre-Code era stretches on for a few more years is that the Code remains unenforceable.

In 1934, the MPPDA gets serious. They establish the Production Code Administration, the PCA, and they have the power to enforce the rules. Films must be approved by the PCA in three phases—the script has to be okayed, the film has to be okayed, *and* the marketing has to be okayed. No film will be distributed without the PCA’s stamp of approval.

The PCA was headed up by the man you see here, Joseph Breen. He was an influential Catholic activist from Philadelphia who published Catholic journals, and he led the PCA from 1934 all the way up until 1954—though it had less power as the years passed. We’ll talk a little bit more about him and the PCA’s role in WWII in a few more lectures. I’ve also included in your optional clips a little footage of Breen explaining the production code, so you can hear it from the horse’s mouth.

**Betty Boop**

I was looking for a quick demo of how the production code changed moviemaking, and I realized that cartoon character Betty Boop is a super clear example. **[ANIMATION]** Here’s Betty Boop in the 1920s—tube dress, visible garter. **[ANIMATION]** Now, here’s Betty Boop in 1935. Note her longer sleeves and hemline. Even cartoon characters didn’t escape the watchful, moral eye of the Production Code Administration.

**Review**

The Hays Code might have come about because of public outcry—but that outcry was *not* universal. Obviously, people were going to those filthy pre-Code pictures and many enjoyed them just the way they were, thank you very much. They noticed when Code was enforced, and they were not pleased. This is a review of the 1934 Dolores Del Rio film *Madame Du Barry* from the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*. Here’s the first paragraph.

*The boys who write the advertising catch lines for the Warner Brothers have concocted a quaint slogan for Dolores Del Rio’s new starring picture, “Madame du Barry,” which had its premiere yesterday at the Manhattan Strand Theater. They call it the Brothers Warner’s “Royal Blush.” To report the truth, however, there isn’t a blush in a carload in this lavishly produced record of Du Barry’s life at the court of the 15th Louis of France. Apparently the Purity Leaguers have seen to that. Their job of disinfecting has been nothing if not vigorous and thorough.*

**Outcomes**

Okay. Let’s clear up just a couple of things before we wrap up. First, was Hollywood *censored* by the production code? **[ANIMATION]** No—not in the legal sense. This was not a case of the government stepping in to say what Hollywood films could and could not say. Instead, the industry regulated itself.

But in practice, did the Hays Code limit what films show? **[ANIMATION]** Absolutely. Studio films needed PCA approval to get out to audiences. You *could still* produce a film without the Production Code Administration’s stamp of approval, but because the studios were so powerful and vertically integrated, it would be virtually impossible to distribute that film without them.

The Code remained in effect in some form or another all the way into the 1960s. So, what was the end result?

**[ANIMATION]** On the negative side, when it was most enforced most emphatically, the result was often cheesy, unrealistic, formulaic films. Also, the Code said it banned unflattering portrayals of nations, peoples, ethnicities, races or religions, but it didn’t succeed in stopping very racist films from being made.

On the positive side, it *did* force filmmakers to get creative. Some of Hollywood’s most treasured films were released under the Production Code, and directors, writers, and actors found ways to say what they needed to say through innuendo, allusion, and metaphor. Also, they got sneaky—sometimes they’d throw in a bunch of obviously ridiculous sex scenes so that the smaller stuff they really wanted to show would squeak through the approval process.

Finally, it’s important to remember that the code affects our national cinema as a whole. From 1934 on, American film becomes synonymous with the Production Code, and the Production Code shapes every American film. It’s an inflexible set of rules that *reflect the tastes of a certain faction of the public in 1934.* However, tastes change. Beliefs change. Politics change. And as we’ll find out later in the semester, the frozen values of the Production Code disadvantage American film when people want to see something different.