

The Motion Picture Production Code of 1930

Author's Note: Though various texts of the Production Code have been reprinted over the years in trade journals, memoirs, and scholarly work, the Production Code Administration archives at the Margaret Herrick Library in Los Angeles contain no “definitive” copy of the Code as adopted in 1930 and enforced thereafter (the files for *Freaks* [1932] and *King Kong* [1933] have also disappeared). The extant versions of the Code vary somewhat in typographical details, layout, word choice, and arrangement of the text. Some omit the philosophical passages or lack a later amendment to the “working principles.” Cross-checked against other versions for accuracy, the text below derives from the version printed in Olga J. Martin’s *Hollywood’s Movie Commandments*, published in 1937. As Joseph Breen’s former secretary, Martin had access to the most complete, contemporaneous document consulted by Hollywood’s in-house censors.

FIRST SECTION

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

- I. Theatrical motion pictures, that is, pictures intended for the theatre as distinct from pictures intended for churches, schools, lecture halls, educational movements, social reform movements, etc., are primarily to be regarded as *Entertainment*.

Mankind has always recognized the importance of entertainment and its value in rebuilding the bodies and souls of human beings.

But it has always recognized that entertainment can be of a character either *helpful* or *harmful* to the human race, and, in consequence, has clearly distinguished between:

Entertainment which tends to improve the race, or, at least, to recreate and rebuild human beings exhausted with the realities of life; and

Entertainment which tends to degrade human beings, or to lower their standards of life and living.

Hence the *moral importance* of entertainment is something which has been universally recognized. It enters intimately into the lives of men and women and affects them closely; it occupies their minds and affections during leisure hours, and ultimately touches the whole of their lives. A man may be judged by his standard of entertainment as easily as by the standard of his work.

So correct entertainment raises the whole standard of a nation.

Wrong entertainment lowers the whole living condition and moral ideals of a race.

NOTE, for example, the healthy reactions to healthful moral sports like baseball, golf; the unhealthy reactions to sports like cockfighting, bullfighting, bear-baiting, etc. Note, too, that effect on a nation of gladiatorial combats, the obscene plays of Roman times, etc.

II. Motion pictures are very important as *Art*.

Though a new art, possibly a combination art, it has the same object as the other arts, the presentation of human thoughts, emotions, and experiences, in terms of an appeal to the soul thru the senses.

Here, as in entertainment:

Art enters intimately into the lives of human beings.

Art can be morally good, lifting men to higher levels.

This has been done thru good music, great painting, authentic fiction, poetry, drama.

Art can be morally evil in its effects. This is the case clearly enough with unclean art, indecent books, suggestive drama. The effect on the lives of men and women is obvious.

NOTE: It has often been argued that art in itself is unmoral, neither good nor bad. This is perhaps true of the *thing* which is music, painting, poetry, etc. But the thing is the *product* of some person's mind, and that mind was either good or bad morally when it produced the thing. And the thing has its *effect* upon

those who come into contact with it. In both these ways, as a product and the cause of definite effects, it has a deep moral significance and an unmistakable moral quality.

HENCE: The motion pictures which are the most popular of modern arts for the masses, have their moral quality from the minds which produce them and from their effects on the moral lives and reactions of their audiences. This gives them a most important morality.

- (1) They *reproduce* the morality of the men who use the pictures as a medium for the expression of their ideas and ideals.
- (2) They *affect* the moral standards of those who thru the screen take in these ideas and ideals.

In the case of the motion pictures, this effect may be particularly emphasized because no art has so quick and so widespread an appeal to the masses. It has become in an incredibly short period, *the art of the multitudes*.

III. The motion picture has special *Moral obligations*:

- (A) Most arts appeal to the mature. This art appeals at once *to every class*—mature, immature, developed, undeveloped, law-abiding, criminal. Music has its grades for different classes; so has literature and drama. This art of the motion picture, combining as it does the two fundamental appeals of looking at a picture and listening to a story, at once reaches every class of society.
- (B) Because of the mobility of a film and the ease of picture distribution, and because of the possibility of duplicating positives in large quantities, this art *reaches places* unpenetrated by other forms of art.
- (C) Because of these two facts, it is difficult to produce films intended for only *certain classes of people*. The exhibitor's theatres are built for the masses, for the cultivated and the rude, mature and immature, self-restrained and inflammatory, young and old, law-respecting and criminal. Films, unlike books and music, can with difficulty be confined to certain selected groups.
- (D) The latitude given to film material cannot, in consequence, be as wide as the latitude given to *book material*. In addition:
 - (a) A book describes; a film vividly presents.
 - (b) A book reaches the mind thru words merely; a film

reaches the eyes and ears thru the reproduction of actual events.

- (c) The reaction of a reader to a book depends largely on the keenness of the reader; the reaction to a film depends of the vividness of presentation.
- (E) This is also true when comparing the film with the newspapers. Newspapers present by description, films by actual presentation. Newspapers are after the fact and present things that have taken place; the film gives the events in the process of enactment and with apparent reality of life.
- (F) Everything possible in a play is not possible in a film.
 - (a) Because of the larger audience of the film, and its consequently mixed character. Psychologically, the larger the audience, the lower the moral mass resistance to suggestion.
 - (b) Because thru light, enlargement of character presentation, scenic emphasis, etc., the screen story is brought closer to the audience than the play.
 - (c) The enthusiasm for and interest in the film *actors and actresses*, developed beyond anything of the sort in history, makes the audience largely sympathetic toward the characters they portray and the stories in which they figure. Hence they are more ready to confuse the actor and character, and they are most receptive of the emotions and ideals portrayed and presented by their favorite stars.
- (G) Small communities, remote from sophistication and from the hardening process which often takes place in the ethical and moral standards of larger cities, are easily and readily reached by any sort of film.
- (H) The grandeur of mass meetings, large action, spectacular features, etc., affects and arouses more intensely the emotional side of the audience.

IN GENERAL: The mobility, popularity, accessibility, emotional appeal, vividness, straight-forward presentation of fact in the films makes for intimate contact on a larger audience and greater emotional appeal.

Hence, the larger moral responsibilities of the motion pictures.

SECOND SECTION

WORKING PRINCIPLES

- I. No picture should lower the moral standards of those who see it. This is done:

- (a) When evil is made to appear *attractive*, and good is made to appear *unattractive*.
- (b) When the *sympathy* of the audience is thrown on the side of crime, wrong-doing, evil, sin. The same thing is true of a film that would throw sympathy against goodness, honor, innocence, purity, honesty.

NOTE: *Sympathy with a person who sins*, is not the same as sympathy with the sin or crime of which he is guilty. We may feel sorry for the plight of the murderer or even understand the circumstances which led him to his crime; we may not feel sympathy with the wrong which he has done.

The presentation of evil is often essential for art, or fiction, or drama. This in itself is not wrong, provided:

- (a) That evil is *not presented alluringly*. Even if later on the evil is condemned or punished, it must not be allowed to appear so attractive that the emotions are drawn to desire or approve so strongly that later they forget the condemnation and remember only the apparent joy of the sin.
- (b) That thruout the presentation, *evil and good are never confused* and that evil is always recognized clearly as evil.
- (c) That in the end the audience feels that *evil is wrong* and *good is right*.

- II. Law, natural or divine, must not be belittled, ridiculed, nor must a sentiment be created against it.

- (A) The *presentation of crimes* against the law, human or divine, is often necessary for the carrying out of the plot. But the presentation must not throw sympathy with the criminal as against the law, nor with the crime as against those who must punish it.
- (B) The *courts* of the land should not be presented as *unjust*.

III. As far as possible, life should not be misrepresented, at least not in such a way as to place in the minds of youth false values on life.

NOTE: This subject is touched just in passing. The attention of the producers is called, however, to the magnificent possibilities of the screen for character development, the building of right ideals, the inculcation in story-form of right principles. If motion pictures consistently held up high types of character, presented stories that would affect lives for the better, they could become the greatest natural force for the improvement of mankind.

PRINCIPLES OF PLOT

In accordance with the general principles laid down:

- (1) No plot theme should definitely side *with evil and against good*.
- (2) Comedies and farces should not make fun of good, innocence, morality or justice.
- (3) No plot should be so constructed as to leave the question of *right or wrong in doubt or fogged*.
- (4) No plot should by its treatment *throw the sympathy* of the audience with sin, crime, wrong-doing or evil.
- (5) No plot should present evil alluringly.

Serious Film Drama

- I. As stated in the general principles, sin and evil enter into the story of human beings, and hence in themselves are dramatic material.
- II. In the use of this material, it must be distinguished between *sin* which by its very nature *repels*, and *sin* which by its nature *attracts*.
 - (a) In the first class comes murder, most theft, most legal crimes, lying, hypocrisy, cruelty, etc.
 - (b) In the second class come sex sins, sins and crimes of apparent heroism, such as banditry, daring thefts, leadership in evil, organized crime, revenge, etc.
 - (A) The first class needs little care in handling, as sins and crimes of this class naturally are unattractive. The audience instinctively condemns and is repelled. Hence the one objective must be to avoid the hardening of the audiences, especially of those who are young and impressionable, to the thought and the fact

of crime. People can become accustomed even to murder, cruelty, brutality, and repellent crimes.

- (B) The second class needs real care in handling, as the response of human natures to their appeal is obvious. This is treated more fully below.

III. A careful distinction can be made between films intended for *general distribution*, and films intended for use in theatres restricted to a *limited audience*. Themes and plots quite appropriate for the latter would be altogether out of place and dangerous in the former.

NOTE: In general, the practice of using a general theatre and limiting the patronage during the showing of a certain film to "adults only" is not completely satisfactory and is only partially effective. However, maturer minds may easily understand and accept without harm subject matter in plots which does younger people positive harm.

HENCE: If there should be created a special type of theatre, catering exclusively to an adult audience, for plays of this character (plays with problem themes, difficult discussions and maturer treatment) it would seem to afford an outlet, which does not now exist, for pictures unsuitable for general distribution for exhibitions to a restricted audience.

PLOT MATERIAL

- (1) *The triangle*, that is, the love of a third party by one already married, needs careful handling, if marriage, the sanctity of the home, and sex morality are not to be imperiled.
- (2) *Adultery* as a subject should be avoided:
 - (a) It is *never* a fit subject for *comedy*. Thru comedy of this sort, ridicule is thrown on the essential relationships of home and family and marriage, and illicit relationships are made to seem permissible, and either delightful or daring.
 - (b) Sometimes adultery must be counted on as material occurring in serious drama.

In this case:

- (1) It should not appear to be justified;
- (2) It should not be used to weaken respect for marriage;
- (3) It should not be presented as attractive or alluring.

- (3) *Seduction and rape* are difficult subjects and bad material from the viewpoint of the general audience in the theatre.
 - (a) They should never be introduced as subject matter *unless* absolutely essential to the plot.
 - (b) They should *never* be treated as comedy.
 - (c) Where essential to the plot, they must not be more than *suggested*.
 - (d) Even the struggles preceding rape should not be shown.
 - (e) The *methods* by which seduction, essential to the plot, is attained should not be explicit or represented in detail where there is likelihood of arousing wrongful emotions on the part of the audience.
- (4) *Scenes of passion* are sometime necessary for the plot. However:
 - (a) They should appear only where necessary and *not* as an added stimulus to the emotions of the audience.
 - (b) *When not essential to the plot*, they should not occur.
 - (c) They must *not* be *explicit* in action nor vivid in method, e.g. by handling of the body, by lustful and prolonged kissing, by evidently lustful embraces, by positions which strongly arouse passions.
 - (d) In general, where essential to the plot, scenes of passion should *not* be presented in such a way as to *arouse or excite the passions of the ordinary spectator*.
- (5) Sexual immorality is sometimes necessary for the plot. It is subject to the following:

GENERAL PRINCIPLES—regarding plots dealing with sex, passion, and incidents relating to them:

All legislators have recognized clearly that there are in normal human beings emotions which react naturally and spontaneously to the presentation of certain definite manifestations of sex and passion.

- (a) The presentation of scenes, episodes, plots, etc., which are deliberately meant to excite these manifestations on the part of the audience is always wrong, is subversive to the interest of society, and a peril to the human race.
- (b) Sex and passion exist and consequently must *sometimes enter* into the stories which deal with human beings.
 - (1) *Pure love*, the love of a man for a woman permitted by the law of God and man, is the rightful subject

of plots. The passion arising from this love is not the subject for plots.

- (2) *Impure love*, the love of man and woman forbidden by human and divine law, must be presented in such a way that:
 - (a) It is clearly known by the audience to be wrong;
 - (b) Its presentation does not excite sexual reactions, mental or physical, in an ordinary audience;
 - (c) It is not treated as matter for comedy.

HENCE: *Even within the limits of pure love*, certain facts have been universally regarded by lawmakers as outside the limits of safe presentation. These are the manifestations of passion and the sacred intimacies of private life:

- (1) Either before marriage in the courtship of decent people;
- (2) Or after marriage, as is perfectly clear.

In the case of pure love, the difficulty is not so much about what details are permitted for presentation. This is perfectly clear in most cases. The difficulty concerns itself with the tact, delicacy, and general regard for propriety manifested in their presentation.

But in the case of impure love, the love which society has always regarded as wrong and which has been banned by divine law, the following are important:

- (1) It must not be the subject of comedy or farce or treated as the material for laughter;
- (2) It must not be presented as attractive and beautiful;
- (3) It must not be presented in such a way as to arouse passion or morbid curiosity on the part of the audience;
- (4) It must not be made to seem right and permissible;
- (5) In general, it must not be detailed in method or manner.
- (6) *The presentation of murder* is often necessary for the carrying out of the plot. However:
 - (a) Frequent presentation of *murder* tends to lessen regard for the sacredness of life.
 - (b) *Brutal killings* should not be presented in detail.
 - (c) *Killings for revenge* should not be justified, i.e., the hero should not take justice into his own hands in such a way as

to make his killings seem justified. This does not refer to killings in self-defense.

- (d) *Dueling* should not be presented as right or just.
- (7) *Crimes against the law* naturally occur in the course of film stories. However:
 - (a) *Criminals* should not be made heroes, even if they are historical criminals.
 - (b) *Law and justice* must not by the treatment they receive from criminals be made to seem wrong or ridiculous.
 - (c) *Methods of committing crime*, e.g., burglary, should not be so explicit as to teach the audience how crime can be committed; that is, the film should not serve as a possible school in crime methods for those who seeing the methods might use them.
 - (d) Crime need *not always be punished*, as long as the audience is made to know that it is wrong.

DETAILS OF PLOT, EPISODE, AND TREATMENT

Vulgarity

Vulgarity may be carefully distinguished from obscenity.

Vulgarity is the treatment of low, disgusting, unpleasant subjects which decent society considers outlawed from normal conversation.

Vulgarity in the motion pictures is limited in precisely the same way as in decent groups of men and women by the dictates of good taste and civilized usage, and by the effect of shock, scandal, and harm on those coming in contact with this vulgarity.

- (1) *Oaths* should never be used as a comedy element. Where required by the plot, the less offensive oaths may be permitted.
- (2) *Vulgar expressions* come under the same treatment as vulgarity in general. Where women and children are to see the film, vulgar expressions (and oaths) should be cut to the absolute essentials required by the situation.
- (3) The name of *Jesus Christ* should never be used except in reverence.

Obscenity

Obscenity is concerned with immorality, but has the additional connotation of being common, vulgar and coarse.

- (1) *Obscenity in fact*, that is, in spoken word, gesture, episode, plot, is against divine and human law, and hence altogether outside the range of subject matter or treatment.
- (2) Obscenity should *not be suggested* by gesture, manner, etc.
- (3) An obscene reference, even if it is expected to be understandable to only the more sophisticated part of the audience, should not be introduced.
- (4) *Obscene language* is treated as all obscenity.

Costume

GENERAL PRINCIPLES

- (1) The effect of nudity or semi-nudity upon the normal man or woman, and much more upon the young person, has been honestly recognized by all lawmakers and moralists.
- (2) Hence the fact that the nude or semi-nude body may be *beautiful* does not make its use in the films moral. For in addition to its beauty, the effects of the nude or semi-nude on the normal individual must be taken into consideration.
- (3) Nudity or semi-nudity used simply to put a “punch” into a picture comes under the head of immoral actions as treated above. It is immoral in its effect upon the average audience.
- (4) Nudity or semi-nudity is sometimes apparently necessary for the plot. *Nudity is never permitted*. Semi-nudity may be permitted under conditions.

PARTICULAR PRINCIPLES

- (1) *The more intimate parts of the human body* are the male and female organs and the breasts of a woman.
 - (a) They should *never be uncovered*.
 - (b) They should not be covered with *transparent* or *translucent* material.
 - (c) They should not be clearly and unmistakably *outlined* by the garment.
- (2) *The less intimate parts of the body*, the legs, arms, shoulders and back, are less certain of causing reactions of the part of the audience. Hence:
 - (a) Exposure *necessary for the plot* or action is permitted.
 - (b) Exposure *for the sake of exposure* or the “punch” is wrong.
 - (c) *Scenes of undressing* should be avoided. When necessary for

the plot, they should be kept within the limits of decency. When not necessary for the plot, they are to be avoided, as their effect on the ordinary spectator is harmful.

- (d) *The manner or treatment of exposure* should not be suggestive or indecent.
- (e) The following is important in connection with *dancing costumes*:
 - 1. Dancing costumes cut to permit *grace* or freedom of movement, provided they remain within the limits of decency indicated are permissible.
 - 2. Dancing costumes cut to permit indecent actions or movements or to make possible during the dance indecent exposure, are wrong, especially when permitting:
 - (a) Movements of the breasts
 - (b) Movements of sexual suggestions of the intimate parts of the body;
 - (c) Suggestion of nudity.

Dancing

- (1) Dancing in general is recognized as an *art* and a *beautiful* form of expressing human emotion.
 - (2) Obscene dances are those:
 - (a) Which suggest or represent sexual actions, whether performed solo or with two or more;
 - (b) Which are designed to excite an audience, to arouse passions, or to cause physical excitement.
- HENCE: Dances of the type known as “Kooch” or “Can-Can,” since they violate decency in these two ways, are wrong. Dances with movements of the breasts, excessive body movement while the feet remain stationary, the so-called “belly dances”—these dances are immoral, obscene, and hence altogether wrong.

Locations

Certain places are so closely and thoroughly associated with sexual life or with sexual sin that their use must be carefully limited.

- (1) *Brothels and houses of ill-fame*, no matter of what country, are *not* proper locations for drama. They suggest to the average person at

once sex sin, or they excite an unwholesome and morbid curiosity in the minds of youth.

IN GENERAL: They are dangerous and bad dramatic locations.

- (2) *Bedrooms.* In themselves they are perfectly innocent. Their suggestion may be kept innocent. However, under certain conditions they are bad dramatic locations.
 - (a) Their use in a comedy or farce (on the principle of the so-called bedroom farce) is wrong, because they suggest sex laxity and obscenity.
 - (b) In serious drama, their use should, where sex is suggested, be confined to absolute essentials, in accordance with the principles laid down above.

Religion

- (1) No film or episode in a film should be allowed to *throw ridicule* on any religious faith honestly maintained.
- (2) *Ministers of religion* in their characters or ministers should not be used in comedy, as villains, or as unpleasant persons.

NOTE: The reason for this is not that there are not such ministers of religion, but because the attitude toward them tends to be an attitude toward religion in general.

Religion is lowered in the minds of the audience because it lowers their respect for the ministers.

- (3) *Ceremonies* of any definite religion should be supervised by someone thoroughly conversant with that religion.