

How did the  
production code  
affect the way  
hollywood narratives  
were structured i...



The great depression and roaring twenties era in America lead to Hollywood producing what some thought of as a constant succession of sordid and immoral films; films that revolved around crime, sin and infidelity. This led to the creation of ' the production code' " adopted in 1930 to roll back the profligacy of the 1920s and Set a reformed America again on the path of righteousness in the new harsher decade" (Doherty, p 6). Throughout this essay I will examine the ways in which the regulations the production code put in place affected Hollywood narratives throughout the 1930s. As well as examining the strong difference in regulation between the early and late 1930s. The Production code, also known as the Hayes code (named after Will H. Hayes president of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America), was written by Martin Quigley a Roman Catholic layman and Father Daniel Lord a Jesuit priest. As a result the whole document contained strong religious connotations.

The code was designed to address the " evinced concern for the proper nurturing of the young and the protection of women, demanded due respect or indigenous ethnics and foreign peoples, and sought to uplift the low orders and convert the criminal mentality" (Doherty, p 6). The code contained two main categories of regulations. Firstly based around general principles and a moral vision and then secondly around particular applications. This was a list detailing material that should be forbidden from Hollywood films. However the appointed head of the Hayes office committee, Jason Joy was not a strong enforcer of the codes regulations.

This led to the era of 1930- 1934 to be known as the pre -code a time in which the rules of the Hayes code were often ignored by filmmakers. As a

result narratives of films made in the early 1930s were not greatly affected by the code and continued to be what some considered as sinful and outrageous as ever. The code was viewed as a mockery that no studio took seriously with Variety magazine stating in 1933 “ producers have reduced the Hays Production code to sieve-like proportions and are deliberately out-smarting their own document ” (Doherty, p8).

Several films released throughout the early 1930s contained uncensored controversial narrative elements. For example the film Red Dust (1932, Victor Fleming) released in the middle of the pre-code era contains many elements that clearly do not abide by many of the rules and moral guidelines set in place. Clark Gable stars as Denis Carson a rubber plantation owner who drinks a lot of alcohol and is often shown to be bare chested. The story revolves around a love triangle between Carson, bar hostess Vantine and Barbara Willis, wife of Gary Willis who is one of Carson’s workers on the plantation.

The narrative does not adhere to the code for many reasons. The uses of excessive amounts of alcohol are frequently portrayed, unnecessary amounts of skin are shown and Vantine is known to be on the run from the authorities in Saigon. A factor, which suggests she has participated in criminal activity of some kind. Additionally it is implied that the character of Vantine is a prostitute, an implication that was not concealed enough to fool a 1930s audience.

The affair between Carlton Barbara Willis was seen as “ violating propriety and the bonds of matrimony with impunity” (Doherty, 14). The sin made worse by the fact the couple certified the relation ship by the narrative <https://assignbuster.com/how-did-the-production-code-affect-the-way-hollywood-narratives-were-structured-in-the-1930s/>

implying they had adulterous sexual relations. The constant disregard for the rules of the Hayes code in the narrative of this *Red Dust* are portrayed even more indefinitely within the conclusion of the film. This is as there is no slight indication that the characters pay a price for their moral wrong doings.

Barbara returns to her husband and Carson turns his attentions back to the eagerly waiting Vantine. The last camera shot of the film shows Carson fondling Vantine as she nurses him. This provides the suggestion that another sin is about to take place in the form of premarital sex. Consequently causing no one to suffer “for the sins of the flesh” (Doherty, p15). Another film in the pre-code era that blatantly showed disregard for the codes regulations was Mervyn LeRoy’s 1932 prison drama *I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang*.

The film’s protagonist is James Allen, an ex world war one sergeant now unable to find work. Allen gets wrongly accused of a robbery and despite his innocence is sentenced to work on a southern chain gang for 10 years. The film portrays the segregation of the black and white convicts, a rare example of an element of this film that actually does abide by the Hayes code. This is as Miscegenation, or mixing within races was forbidden. The convicts are subjected frequently to abuse and violence at the hands of their justice system captors.

Director LeRoy’s image of torture conceals the worst of it but reveals enough for the picture to be indelible in the mind’s eye” (Doherty, p164). This portrayal of violence causes the audience to feel sympathy for the criminals and see the law enforcers as the evil characters. This is a direct infringement of the rules of the code as it states that the “presentation must not throw  
<https://assignbuster.com/how-did-the-production-code-affect-the-way-hollywood-narratives-were-structured-in-the-1930s/>

sympathy with the criminal " (Doherty, p 351)- try find in another source it also states that authority figures such as the police or other law enforcers should not be portrayed as villainous characters.

The film continues with Allen escaping from the chain gang and going on the run, then marrying Marie Woods (who is a serial adulterer). In the final scenes of the film when Allen informs his true love Helen that he must leave so as to escape the police she asks " Jim. How do you live? " Allen replies with the famous line " I steal" whilst he retreats into the darkness. This line became famous as it presents the idea that Allen, who once was an innocent law abiding man who fought for his country, has now succumbed to a criminal lifestyle.

The fact he says his line whilst retreating into the shadows makes his choice even more dramatic and symbolic. Some critics regarded the film as a social realist film that portrayed the hardships caused by the Wall Street crash in 1929, an event that then triggered a nation wide depression. Therefore the film was regarded by some as " a moral panic expressing class and cultural anxieties at a time of social, economic and political uncertainty; movie content was the site of this moral panic, rather than the cause of it" (Maltby, date published unknown).

This incited the film was not deliberately going against the code but just portraying reality as the main character of John Allen was a victim of the depression with " no hope, no future, and no morality for this unforgettable man swallowed by the abyss of the Great Depression of America"(Doherty, p166). However this was not the view of many and so led to many religious outcries . The fact that the film itself is based on a memoir by real life <https://assignbuster.com/how-did-the-production-code-affect-the-way-hollywood-narratives-were-structured-in-the-1930s/>

criminal Robert Elliot Burns, who at the time of production was on the run from the law in real life, gave even more anger to those against the film.

There was similar opposition and protest raised with gangster films based around the life of also at large criminal John Dillinger. Which led Hayes to state that films based on Dillinger's life would not be made as "such a picture would be detrimental to the best public interest" (Doherty, p 137)

The constant succession of what the Catholic Church considered to be immoral films led them threatening to boycott Hollywood if the code was not abided by along with establishing the Legion of Decency in April 1934.

This was an organization that evaluated the moral content of a film to the advise their catholic congregation. A number of reports showing connections between bad behavior and bad films were also written. This caused the studios to have outraged the state, the church and social science. It was this uproar that led to the requirement that all films released after 1st July 1934 would need a certificate of approval from the Production Code Administration, headed by strict Catholic Joseph Breen.

This caused censorship on Hollywood films to be a lot stricter, causing narratives to become more and more affected by the constraints outlined in the production code with scripts often being sent to the PCA for approval before even going into production. Under the new strict regime of the PCA, the gangster genre became obsolete. Many believed the genre encouraged criminality amongst the youth along with the Justice Department believing the genre "encouraged general disrespect for police and a lenient attitude toward thugs". One of the most notable films that were strictly censored was the Tarzan film eries. A scene noted as being particularly scandalous was the <https://assignbuster.com/how-did-the-production-code-affect-the-way-hollywood-narratives-were-structured-in-the-1930s/>

swimming scene in pre-code film *Tarzan and his Mate* (Cedric Gibbons, Jack Conway, 1934). Despite the fact *Tarzan and his Mate* was released a few months before the PCA certificate of approval was set in place it was still subject to strict censorship due to the presence of Joseph Breen. Most notably seen as scandalous was the swimming scene in which Jane is seen to be completely naked. Breen was outraged that the scene was “ particularly offensive” due to the code stating “ complete nudity is never permitted” (Doherty, p 261).

MGM agreed to cut the scene on the basis that it meant Jane’s revealing costume of a halter neck and loincloth exposing the actress’s thighs was kept. However in the following sequel *Tarzan Finds a Son* (Richard Thorpe, 1939) now released under stricter censorship caused the costume to be dramatically changed to a ragged dress concealing more of the actresses skin. The love scenes in the movies that followed were now more cautious and less affectionate as in the pervious films in this franchise.

Leading to critics now saying, “ what the production code would soon change for good in American movies is evident in the love sense ” (Bernard, p271). The portrayals of love scenes in film narratives were greatly effected in the late 1930s with the code detailing, “ Excessive and lustful kissing, lustful embraces, suggestive postures and gestures, are not to be shown,” (Conradt, 2010). For example in 1938 the already released film *All Quiet on the Western Front* (Louis Milestone, 1930) was called to be re released certain section of the love scene had being cut.

Additionally in the film *It Happened One Night* (Frank Capra, 1934) Clark Gable and Claudette Colber are stranded in a hotel together for a night. The <https://assignbuster.com/how-did-the-production-code-affect-the-way-hollywood-narratives-were-structured-in-the-1930s/>

two hang a blanket between the two beds so as to obscure their view of each other and remain morally pure and innocent. Breen even campaigned against the idea of Warner brother purchasing the rights to of Mice and Men it was referred to as “ sexual perversion” and was said that the Broadway show version contained “ vulgar, obscene and profane dialogue”. One mistake the writers of the Production Code made was considering the audience as passive viewers.

They did not consider “ the scopophilic instinct: that is, eroticized love of looking which spectacle plays upon and satisfies” (Maltby, p340). This suggests the idea that audiences could derive immoral meaning from a film that visually on the surface appeared innocent. This meant that enforcers of the Hayes Code had to intertextually analyze films. This was done so as to make sure that immoral themes or unfavorable political opinions were not only not shown on screen visually, but also not implied subversively within in the narrative.

Moves were taken by the PCA to create “ narrative rehabilitation” (Doherty, p10). It was easy enough for Breen to cut out blatant accounts of immoral scenes such as is in Tarzan and his Mate where there was obvious nudity. However its much more difficult to censor underlying meanings that an audience member could or could not derive from the narrative depending on their own personal perception. An example is in the film The Office Wife (Lloyd Bacon, 1930). The narrative implies that Joan Blondell is naked.

This is done through a series of close ups of her legs and arms and clothes falling to the floor. However no obscene amount of nudity is ever shown on screen, it is just suggested to audiences. It was elements such as this that <https://assignbuster.com/how-did-the-production-code-affect-the-way-hollywood-narratives-were-structured-in-the-1930s/>



led to the creation of the classical narrative. This was illustrated strongly in films such as *Casablanca* (1942, Curtiz). The film was said to be “not one movie. It is Movies” (Maltby, p 345) implying that all films created after the strict enforcement of the Hayes Code in 1934 followed a similar narrative structures so as to adhere to all moral codes.

However the creation of this classical narrative meant there was always a happy ending, pre marital sex never occurred and crime was proven to certainly not pay. Uncomfortable issues were not addressed and certain subject matter ignored. For example in *Casablanca* when the characters of Rick and Ilsa reconcile as they kiss the picture on screen changes to that of an airport tower and then returns again to the two characters in Rick’s apartment. Although time has passed no implication of whether or not Rick and Ilsa had sex is implied or denied.

Some argued that this was the PCA’s attempt at “refusing to take responsibility for the story some viewers may choose to construct” (Maltby, p349) and so henceforth losing “an instability of meaning” (Maltby, p349). To conclude in the early 1930’s the production code had little to no effect on the narratives of Hollywood films. Perhaps excluding the issue of miscegenation, however this could be seen as being due to high levels of racism that were a strong feature in American society in the 1930s. Films continued to contain what some viewed as immoral narratives, containing crime, violence and adultery.

However under continued religious and political pressure as well as the new creation of the PCA and appointment of Joseph Breen the code then in the mid 1930s became a lot stricter. “For many Breen remained the film butcher  
<https://assignbuster.com/how-did-the-production-code-affect-the-way-hollywood-narratives-were-structured-in-the-1930s/>

for the world, the censor who lived by one commandment, thou shalt not offend" (Leonard J. Leff, Jerold Simmons, p82) this was due to his fear of including any element in a narrative that any audience find offensive. This then led to narratives that were " like the chameleon, it is adaptable, resilient and accommodating. It will try to be what the spectator believes it to be".