

How were sunset
boulevard and north
by northwest affected
by the hays code?



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The history and evolution of Hollywood makes for an interesting subject of inquiry. The origins of film industry in the United States can be traced back to the 1920s, when the first silent movies were opened for public viewing. The movies released in the first decade were free of any censorship and hence contained controversial content. The 1920s were known as the 'Jazz Age' and Americans prospered due to the zooming of stock markets and the flourishing of the arts. At the turn of the decade, the Great Depression set in, precipitated by the biggest crash in Wall Street history. The country went into a period of great introspection. As politicians and economists were grappling with finding solutions to pull through the economic depression, similar efforts are being made to improve the standards of the film industry. The Hays' Code, introduced in 1934 was one such outcome. Although the United States Motion Picture Production Code of 1930 came ahead of Hays Code, it was not taken seriously by filmmakers, making it necessary for government authorities to introduce and implement a more comprehensive set of guidelines (Friedrich, 1997). The agency given the responsibility of enforcing the code is commonly referred to as the Breen Office (after administrator Joseph Breen).

In this context, it is interesting to see how the content of popular movies such as *Sunset Boulevard* (1951) and *North by Northwest* (1959) were possibly influenced by the code. Both the movies were produced years after the introduction of the code. Hence by the time the movies were conceived and written, the story writer, screenplay writer and the director would have inherently known what is acceptable and what is unacceptable with respect to the Hays Code. There is also documented evidence that the first scripts of

the two movie submitted to the Breen Office were not approved immediately. The production team had to modify a few dialogues and change certain aspects of the film that were deemed to violate the code (Harris, 2008).

To take the case of *Sunset Boulevard*, the story depicts an unusual relationship between a fading Hollywood writer and a former Hollywood leading lady. As the fortunes of both the former stars are fading away, they happen to develop an opportunistic relationship. It was no more than a relationship of convenience, in which, the lady finds comfort from the appreciation she receives from her young lover. Reciprocally, the out-of-business writer attempts to revive his career with the help of contacts with influential people that his lover would bring. “*Sunset Boulevard*, however, which takes place 25 years after the coming of sound, shows us a silent film star scorned by the changes brought on by the new technology, and a modern day screenwriter whose dialogue is not good enough to get him work.” (Staggs, 2002)

There is no real love or affection in this relationship and it was doomed right from the beginning. As the relationship was based on selfish motives from both players, the narrative inevitably leads to a tragic end. Empty and superficial as it seems, such relationships are far from fiction in the Hollywood of 1940s and 1950s. In fact, such relationships are not unheard of in the Hollywood of today as well. In many ways, the movie was intended to be an expose of the dark undercurrents existing in the American film industry. And as such, it is difficult to convince the censors to give it ready approval. Not only did the movie have issues with the censors but it would <https://assignbuster.com/how-were-sunset-boulevard-and-north-by-northwest-affected-by-the-hays-code/>

have also faced opposition from the heads of studios, for it portrayed the industry in bad light. Of the Sanctity of Marriage clause, it is stated that “ the sanctity of marriage and the home had to be upheld. Pictures shall not imply that low forms of sex relationship are the accepted or common thing.

Adultery and illicit sex, although recognized as sometimes necessary to the plot, could not be explicit or justified and were not supposed to be presented as an attractive option” (Harris, 2008). Surely, the relationship between the old Norma Desmond and young Joe Gillis is a breach of this clause, for it falls outside marriage and would qualify as being ‘ low form of sex relationship’. Further, “ while Joe and Betty form the normal, attractive movie couple, Joe and Norma’s relationship stands out as anomalous, at least for films of the period. Norma is much older than Joe, who plays the role of a “ kept man,” accepting money, gifts, and a place to live from a woman protector” (Friedrich, 1997). Hence, it is not difficult to see why the censors would have had a problem approving the script its detailed form.

To circumvent this problem, the production team employed of shrewd tactics on part of the production team that the movie got the approval from the Breen Office. Firstly, Billy Wilder and Charles Brackett started the shooting of the film under the working title A Can of Beans, which sounded rather innocuous to the censors. Secondly, the writer-director team did not send the entire script to the Breen Office. They instead sent it one chapter at a time, making it hard for the censors to perceive its content in totality. Despite such carefulness, the Breen Office did ask for changes to the script, albeit minor ones. For example, Joe Gillis’s “ I’m up that creek and I need a job,” which became “ I’m over a barrel. I need a job.” (Harris, 2008)

In the movie *North by Northwest* (1959), made by the master filmmaker Alfred Hitchcock, there are quite a few tricky passages that attracted the attention of the Breen Office. In the last scene of the preview print sent to the Breen Office, the lead actors Cary Grant and Eva Marie Saint have an intimate moment during their train ride, which tested the censors in terms of its sexual content. According to the Production Code, “scenes of passion were not to be introduced when not essential to the plot. Excessive and lustful kissing was to be avoided, along with any other treatment that might stimulate the lower and baser element” (Harris, 2008). The challenge for the director here is to show their intimacy without breaching this clause of the code. The genius of Hitchcock comes through in the way he finds a solution. As the two of them

“travel by Pullman train to New York. Grant pulls her up into his upper berth, and they fall back in a kiss and, eventually, we assume, more. Unacceptable, the censors ordered: The couple must be sitting up (or at least not lying down) at the fadeout. Hitchcock recalled that he had some outtakes of the train, including a shot of it speeding into a tunnel. In the finished picture, as Roger and Eve begin to fall back, he cuts to that train, in context looking boldly—and whimsically—phallic. The censors were pleased, Hitchcock was delighted, and audiences left the theater smiling” (Leff, 1999)

At another point in the film the dialogue between the lead actors gets a little sexually suggestive. Somehow the censors let this one pass, probably due to oversight. For example, Eve Kendall tells Roger Thornhill “I’m a big girl”, for which Roger replies “Yea, in all the right places too”. The Breen Office has taken to task far less suggestive dialogues, but somehow this one had got <https://assignbuster.com/how-were-sunset-boulevard-and-north-by-northwest-affected-by-the-hays-code/>

through. The high esteem and reputation of Alfred Hitchcock might also have been a reason why this happened. Hitchcock had an amicable relationship with the Breen Office. Moreover, the Breen Office was less concerned with the implications of the story or the narrative, but only its outward depiction in the form of “ treatment of crimes, the treatment of scenes of passion, the treatment of repellant subjects, etc. And Hitchcock’s treatment, his vaunted touch, lessened the burden of the censors; in turn, the censors rewarded the director with more latitude than many of his peers enjoyed. And, showing and telling all only goes only so far. As the Production Code boys and directors like Hitchcock always understood, less is more.” (Allen & Ishii-Gonzales, 2004)

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