

# American cinema essay example

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Famous in Hollywood as the Hays Code, the Motion Picture Production Code was functional in the film industry before the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) came into existence. This code was informally adopted by the industry in 1930, although its full functionality could be traced from 1934. The Code implemented three major principles which all of the motion pictures which were produced in the land needed to abide by. It was instructed that films should refrain from flouting moral standards. Neither should it portray evil in a sympathetic light. Films were also barred from ridiculing the laws of the state. The Code then went on to specify the details of guidelines which were to be followed by every filmmaker in USA who wished to make a film for public show. Finally, the Code came up with a list of prohibitions against homosexuality and nudity. It also stopped the portraiture of foul language, drug abuse, extreme form of violence, adultery in the films of the times.

The issue of morality had come to the forefront in the 1920s in USA and the limelight of the debate was hogged by the presumed influence of films on the society. Films were seen as the epitome of promoting promiscuity and immorality across the society. There were conspicuous protestations by youth, church organizations and even women clubs who strongly demanded censorship for the films that were produced in Hollywood. 36 states were considering bringing laws against the industry and the media too started to portray controversies related to the industry out of proportion. The film industry became weary of the decline in the number of audience who attended the theatres. The industry became worried about being under the scanner which could lead to censorship. Hence, it finally decided to

implement regulations on the films which were produced in Hollywood.

Hays got hired to be the first president of the Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors Association. The influence of several Catholic priests and conservatives within the film industry found expression in the Code which was laid as guideline for all filmmakers in the land of USA. Incidentally, Hays also played a very pivotal role in the foundation of the Catholic Legion of Decency. This used to exert pressure on the industry by boycotting films which were considered immoral for public viewings.

However, it needs to be remembered that the Code was not effectively implemented on films for some time. These intermediary years saw films getting released which are now considered “ pre-Code” releases. These films essentially pushed the expression of sexual impropriety on the screen beyond its prevailing boundary.

Baby Face (1933), which starred Barbara Stanwyck was taken to be the film that ignited the prompt action on the part of the censor. The film was pulled out of theatres after the restrictions were implemented with paramount effect across the industry in 1934. The film was a fast-paced work which portrayed on the screen the story of this woman who utilized her sexual appeal to enhance her riches and power. The film was no less than a grave shock to the vulnerable standards which haunted the industry.

The film portrayed the character of Barbara Stanwyck who was evoked by her father to indulge in promiscuity. After his shocking demise, the lady traveled to New York being advised by the local cobbler who values her mind over physicality. There she employed her sexual appeal to find her way up in the societal order.

This lady had been shown in the film as someone who veils her true intentions behind the mask of innocence which she holds in front of the male counterparts throughout the film. The director had used camera pans outside the building to show her triumph in addition to the use of the sensual sound of the St. Louis Blues and thus hogs the attention of the audience. The lady remained calm and focused on her targets unhindered by any disturbances that come her way.

This film was seen as a threat to the societal institutions and this marred the image of the female folk of the society according to many. Such pieces of artwork were seen as gravely venomous for the society and this called for prompt action on the part of the censor. The portraiture of promiscuity is deeply unforgivable in the eyes of the Association and the film was taken down from the respective theatres without any further delay after the Code came into play.

The Public Enemy was released in 1931 which saw the producers defending the film. The film came with a declaration at the beginning saying that it did not aim to glorify criminality, but meant to portray the status quo during the times of the Great Depression.

In fact, the producers were only concerned about delivering a great gang film which would hog the attention of the audience and fetch profits. But, to avoid the criticism that the movie would promote criminal behavior being a source of inspiration, the producers declared that they aimed to make a sociological treatise. The makers had to debate with the administrators of the Production Code about the content of the film even during the process of filmmaking.

These “ classic gangster films” were produced in one production season only in 1930-31 with only about thirty films being made. By April 1931, no more of such film got released as religious and civic organizations had begun to cry foul over such films. They claimed that these movies inspired the criminals for indulging into criminal acts and were a menace to the society. The makers of the films had to come up with the logic that these films were actually made to deter the mass from participating in such actions and in no way promoted violence and criminality in the society. In the context of this film too the producers argued that the film stripped the character of the gangster of any heroism and actually ridiculed the acts, thus repelling the youth from criminality.

The New York censor board deleted as many as six scenes from the film, *The Public Enemy*, so that it could be released across the theatres in USA. But, the MPPDA plunged into action soon after and imposed restrictions on films. They demanded a proper portraiture of crime and deleted scenes of inter-gang conflicts and stories which had characters of gangsters as the protagonist.

Thus, the Code had planned to impose propriety on the films that would be released. Films were seen as paramount cultural markers and required to deter from inspiring improper actions among the mass. The apotheosis of the cultural form had thus brought in censorship as the flipside which aimed to ensure the moral responsibility of the films toward the American society.

## **Works Cited**

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