

Censorship: An Historical Interpretation

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In Giuseppe Tornatore's *Cinema Paradiso*, a nostalgic look at growing up in a small Sicilian village, the local movie theater dominates the social life of the town. Everyone, it seems, went to the movies because they brought information, entertainment, excitement, and romance to the village. But at least one person feared the power and influence of this modern entertainment. The local priest insisted on censoring the films before they contaminated his flock with the infectious immorality of the outside world. As one villager complained: "I haven't seen a kiss in twenty years!"

The experience of those who attended the *Cinema Paradiso*, while extreme, was shared by movie fans the world over. Convinced that films were capable of seductively changing the moral, ethical, and political values of the audience, censors and moral guardians from Sicily to Hollywood fought to prevent films from achieving the artistic freedom the other art forms enjoyed.

Nowhere was this more true than in America. While the Italian priest tried to protect his flock from "immorality," films were also censored for political content. An analysis of films made in Hollywood from 1930 to the 1960s would show that only a handful dealt with such issues as depression, unemployment, changing moral standards, social reform, racism, fascism, communism and war with the level of realism and honesty they deserved. Hollywood was seemingly ruled by the old adage, attributed to Samuel Goldwyn, "if you have a message, send it by Western Union." Marked by fluff, rather than substance, Hollywood filmmakers were committed to "harmless entertainment." But why was the industry so afraid of making films other than the westerns, cops and robbers, mindless comedies, action thrillers and musicals that dominated studio production?

One answer is obvious. Hollywood films were first and foremost corporate products. They were assembly line productions supervised by

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executive producers whose responsibility was to bring the corporation profit, not artistic praise. With constant cash flow problems caused by huge weekly payrolls and massive debts, the studios were dependent on attracting a world-wide following for their films. They ground out more than 500 films a year in quest for a market that measured in the hundreds of millions of paid admissions every week. The corporations, driven by profit, naturally avoided controversial topics that might offend potential markets. Another factor also helps explain Hollywood's timidity. Censorship. In the United States, state and municipal censorship boards restricted the content of Hollywood films. Abroad, almost every nation which imported Hollywood films screened them for offensive material. The industry also censored itself through a system of "self-regulation" enforced by the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) or the Hays Office, as it was more commonly known.

In America the movies were censored from their inception. By 1913 state and municipal censorship boards enforced a wide variety of censorship codes designed to prohibit films from infecting local communities with screen images that might be considered offensive to "community values." These censorship boards were declared legal by the Supreme Court in 1915 when it ruled that films were not protected under the First Amendment provisions of the Constitution. Despite this censorship the industry remained under attack by religious organizations and women's clubs who accused a Jewish dominated industry of making movies that were corrupting American values. The anti-Semitism of the anti-movie lobby was rarely muted. When a series of sensational sex scandals erupted in Hollywood, Fatty Arbuckle being the most famous, the howls of protest increased. In 1922 industry leaders attempted to counter this criticism by forming a trade association, The Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), to fight censorship legislation, protect domestic and international markets and calm industry critics by cleaning up the image of the movies.

They chose as their new spokesperson Will Hays, conservative, Protestant, middle-Western Republican from Indiana who was Postmaster General in President Warren Harding's cabinet. Hays was perfect for the industry--he was an elder in the Presbyterian church and a member of the Elks, Moose, Rotarians, Kiwanians, Knights of Pythias and a Mason. He brought mainstream respectability to an industry under attack. Appointed "czar" of the movies at a princely salary of \$100,000, Hays fought government censorship while installing his concept of "self-regulation" which restricted and inhibited movies as a vehicle of communication.¹

Ben Hecht, a tremendously talented American writer who wrote for Hollywood studios for more than two decades, perhaps best summarized the impact Hays Office censorship had on American movies. In his autobiography Hecht noted that in the movies "any man who broke the laws, man's or God's, must die, or go to jail, or become a monk, or restore the money he stole before wandering off into the desert." In the movies "anyone who didn't

believe in God . . . was set right by seeing either an angel or witnessing some feat of levitation by one of the characters." In the movies "the most potent and brilliant villains are powerless before little children, parish priests or young virgins with large boobies." And in the movies "there are no problems of labor, politics, domestic life or sexual abnormality" that cannot "be solved happily by a simple Christian phrase or a fine American motto."² Producer David Selznick agreed calling Hollywood films a "flood of claptrap" with not "ten out of ten thousand" worth remembering. Both men bemoaned the failure of the industry to become a center of "human expression."³

One of the most popular films in the United States in 1933, William Wellman's *Wild Boys of the Road*, illustrates the point Hecht and Selznick made. The film was based on a series of sensational newspaper accounts of thousands of American youths who were forced by the depression to leave their homes, their families and their friends in search of work. It was an American tragedy witnessed from coast to coast. Despite the popularity of the film, critics were disappointed. William Troy, film critic for *The Nation*, compared *Wild Boys of the Road* to a Soviet film, *The Road to Life*, that portrayed a similar situation in the Soviet Union.⁴ In the American film Troy noted that conditions were "considerably softened." The boys and girls are not allowed to become so physically filthy or so morally depraved as in the Russian picture." He also found the American film "less intellectual in that it fails to indicate the obstacles that stand in the way of any eventual resocialization of these forgotten children of our present economic order."⁵

Ironically, one major reason for the difference in the approach of the two films to the subject matter was the Hays Office system of censorship. The industry censorship document, known as the Production Code, was written by a Catholic priest, Father Daniel Lord, S.J., and adopted in 1930 as the guideline for Hollywood studios. While the original script of *Wild Boys of the Road* called for a harsh critique of the collapse of the American economic system, the production code would not allow films to offer radical commentary on contemporary politics.

Praised as a major step forward in cleaning up the movies and ridiculed as an unnecessary concession to vocal religious reformers, the Production Code became the dominating factor in determining the form and content of American movies from its adoption to its demise in the mid-1950s. Lord, a professor of dramatics at St. Louis University, had served as a technical advisor to Cecil B. DeMille on the production *King of Kings*. He was asked to write a censorship document by Martin Quigley, an influential lay Catholic, and owner and publisher of the trade journal, *The Motion Picture Herald*. Quigley believed that movies were becoming increasingly "immoral" and that unless the Hays Office became more strict, some type of federal regulation would be passed. To avoid a government invasion of the industry, Quigley convinced Hays to adopt Lord's code.

Lord, like many conservatives of his generation, deplored the modern trend in drama and literature which dealt in realistic terms with social issues. He began a prolific publishing career in 1915 with an article in the *Catholic World* which attacked George Bernard Shaw.⁶ As a young boy he was overwhelmed by D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of A Nation*. The movies, he believed, were so powerful they could "change our whole attitude toward life, civilization, and established customs." He maintained that view through maturity and by the early 1920s had become convinced that the real problem with the movies was their ability to spread the literature of the "ultra-sophisticates" to every small town in America.

Lord's code reflected these attitudes toward literature, drama and the movies. In an introduction to his code he argued that popular entertainment had a moral responsibility to "uplift" the masses. Therefore, this type of entertainment could not have the same "freedom of expression" granted to books and theater, which by their very nature were restricted to small, educated audiences. The movies were the most dangerous form of entertainment because they were the most seductive. They featured beautiful stars in a larger than life format. The movie theaters, the picture palaces built in the 1920s further contributed to this aura of seduction.

Therefore, Lord wrote that movies must "uphold correct standards of life." Crime must not be justified, audiences must always be able to distinguish good from evil, immorality, like adultery, must always be punished and never shown to be thrilling, beautiful or glamorous. Marriage, conversely, must not be shown as conventional, dull, or unsatisfying. Movies, the code demanded, must uphold "the sanctity of . . . marriage and the home." But the code was more than a moral document. Lord also included provisions in the code which regulated the image of government. Movies must not ridicule or present as "unjust" government officials, the court system or the police. Lord recognized that drama often required a corrupt official. But he maintained that this could be done by showing "one" corrupt policeman, one corrupt judge, one corrupt lawyer, rather than showing the entire system as corrupt. Lord hoped that if movies followed his prescription, popular entertainment would re-enforce in the popular mind respect for the institutions of church and state.

Unfortunately, most historical accounts of the film industry fail to take into account the tremendous impact of industry censorship on American films.⁷ Yet every script written and every film produced for more than two decades was subjected to a thorough cleansing before reaching the screen.⁸ Scholars of historical analysis and textual interpretation both need to understand the process of censorship and the motives of the censors in order to reconstruct the movies.

There were two distinct periods of Production Code history. During the first, from January 1930 until the spring of 1934, the code was enforced by MPPDA officials, Jason Joy and Dr. James Wingate, under the umbrella of the Studio Relations Department (SRD). During this period the studios, not the

censors, had the final say on what was acceptable screen fare. Disputes over questionable themes were resolved by a "jury" of producers who almost always voted against the censors. The result was that films produced during the first four years of the Production Code dealt with controversial subjects in a more open and realistic manner. The films were censored, but not as restrictively as they would be after 1934. It is no accident that the best of the Mae West films, *She Done Him Wrong* and *I'm No Angel* were produced during this early period. This latitude in enforcement of the code eventually resulted in the Catholic Church Legion of Decency crisis. The Catholics demanded that the Hays Office create a Production Code Administration (PCA) and appoint a Catholic to enforce the code. In July 1934, the PCA was established and Joseph I. Breen was appointed as director. The Hollywood "jury" appeal system was eliminated. From this date until its demise in the mid-1950s Breen enforced the code with the fervor of a rigid ideologue. Breen and Hays used the PCA, and the threat of a Catholic boycott, to eliminate or soften social and political themes. "Harmless entertainment" became the *modus operandi* for the industry.

This paper will analyze the impact of industry censorship on three films produced during the 1930s--*Gabriel Over the White House* (MGM, 1933), *Madame du Barry* (WB, 1934) and *Dead End* (Goldwyn, 1937). These films illustrate how the Hays Office and its censorship arm, the Production Code Administration, worked to control the political, moral and social messages of mass entertainment in America.

While Hollywood would not have developed into an advocate for social reform, with or without censorship, on occasion the industry did broach sensitive issues. This was especially true in the period from 1930 to 1933 when industry censorship allowed filmmakers more freedom in combining entertainment and political statement. Movie gangsters like Edward G. Robinson in *Little Caesar* (WB, 1931), James Cagney in *The Public Enemy* (WB, 1931) and Paul Muni in *Scarface* (UA, 1932) were violent and exciting screen heroes who shattered the image of the effectiveness of government in protecting the public. Screen gangs, like their real life representatives, terrorized American's urban environment. They brought beer to a thirsty public, but they also brought corruption, violence and an alternative model for success to the screen. Censors claimed that screen gangsters were responsible for a rising crime rate in America and were corrupting young boys into a life of crime. Typical was the Canon William Chase, a professional critic and Protestant minister, who claimed that "the motion picture screen for the past twenty-five years has been a school for crime."⁹ In Chicago, a city admittedly sensitive to criminals, nearly half the cuts made in films in 1930/32 were for glorifying the criminal or for showing the police as ineffective. Or as *Variety* so aptly put it: "Chi Censors Rank Gun Play Ahead of Sex in Their Taboos."¹⁰ Nevertheless, the overall message of gangster movies was that crime did not

pay--a point Hays constantly made and his censors demanded. Unlike real life, Robinson, Cagney and Muni paid for their crimes with their lives.

One of the most unusual films produced in Hollywood, and one that will be used to illustrate how the censorship system worked on films with political themes, *Gabriel Over the White House* (MGM, 1933), portrayed an uncaring and corrupt American government as responsible for the plight of the working man during the depression. Produced for William Randolph Hurst's Cosmopolitan Studios by Walter Wanger, the film was distributed by MGM, one of the most conservative Hollywood studios. Directed by Gregory La Cava, the film starred Walter Huston as a party hack elevated to the Presidency because he was devoted to his party, not because he was in any way qualified to be President of the United States. Released in 1933, the film had an uncanny similarity to the rise of Warren Harding and struck Will Hays as an unnecessary attack on both the Republican Party and the federal government. Hays demanded that the politics of *Gabriel* be re-written to soften the political criticism of the policies of Republican presidents Harding, Coolidge and Hoover.

The basic plot of *Gabriel* is simple. Set in the future, the United States is in the throes of a terrible depression. But political parties control the electoral process and nominate and elect Jud Hammond (Walter Huston) to the presidency. Hammond is a loyal party man who has no political agenda, offering only pat homilies for the woes of the depression: "In accepting this cake from the Bakers Association, I hail it as a symbol of the richness of that prosperity soon to return to our harassed people." He opens cabinet meeting by asking: "What is the business of the day?" He is relieved to be told there is none. Yet unemployment is rampant and a huge army of men is marching on Washington to demand action.

All this changes when Hammond has an automobile accident. When he recovers from the accident he is a changed man. He is now aware of the plight of the unemployed and of the corruption in his cabinet and in Congress. He declares martial law, sets up an "army of the unemployed," eliminates gang rule in America by executing known criminals, and forces the nation's of the world to disarm and repay their World War I debts to America. His heavenly agenda completed, Hammond dies a hero.

When the Hays Office saw the script for *Gabriel* they were concerned that the film was an open attack on the Republican Party, a call for "revolution" against constituted authority which would weaken respect for government and insult America's foreign allies.¹¹ "We are selling entertainment," not "propaganda," screamed Will Hays when he saw the script. The movie "czar" demanded changes that would lessen the political criticism of the film. During the first three months of 1933 the Hays Office bombarded Wanger, La Cava and MGM boss Louis B. Mayer with "suggestions" for making *Gabriel* less offensive. They warned the studio that if the film were produced without changes it might be barred from the New York market. They asked that

comments about the need for a popular "revolution" be eliminated and for those people who were advocating reform in the movie to state clearly that the only way to achieve real change was through "constitutional government."¹² This was in keeping with the demands of the censorship code which called for government to be presented in a positive, not negative, light.

What the Hays Office wanted was a film that would show the government as at least concerned and aware of the problems that the nation faced without offering specific solutions to those problems. A case in point was *I'm a Fugitive From a Chain Gang* (WB, 1932) which detailed misery, corruption and injustice without advocating the elimination of chain gangs. Audiences might logically leap to that conclusion, but the film did not specifically call for it. The gangster films did much the same thing. They detailed crime and showed criminals punished without indicating that American society required major reforms to eliminate poverty. Hays wanted *Gabriel*, and any other film that broached sensitive subjects, to take a similar approach. He asked that the film not become too specific in either illustrating the debt of despair faced by the American public nor advocate a policy of radical change. By keeping films clearly "harmless entertainment," and avoiding social and political commentary, Hays hoped to maintain domestic and foreign markets and avoid expansion of government censorship.

But Hays, despite being the movie "czar" was powerless in 1933 to force studios to change scripts. *Gabriel* was scheduled for release in March, 1933 and Walter Wanger decided to ignore most of the changes requested by Hays. Concerned over the impact that *Gabriel* might have during the banking crisis of 1933, Hays called for an emergency MPPDA board of directors meeting to discuss the status of the industry. What emerged from the meeting was a renewed determination on the part of Hays to enforce the code. Changes were made in *Gabriel* that took some of the sting out of the film--scenes calling for revolution were cut, Hammond's cake speech was eliminated, the President was given authority to suspend Congress and the economic and social changes made implied that the people and the government worked together for change.

The lesson, however, of *Gabriel* was that post-production censorship, no matter how effective, could not change the basic flavor of a film. *Gabriel* was much too critical of government for Will Hays. He emerged from the crisis over *Gabriel* determined to enforce a pre-production censorship on studios and producers who refused to abide by the strictures of the production code.

Within a few months of the release of *Gabriel* a new crisis hit the film industry which would allow Hays to gain the authority over the studios that he had been searching for since 1922. In the spring a book by Henry James Forman, *Our Movie Made Children*, which seemed to prove that movies did have a corrupting influence on children, was a national best-seller. Forman's book was a sensational and inaccurate summary of nine separate academic studies sponsored by the Payne Fund. While the academics had been careful not to draw unfounded conclusions, Forman charged that the movies were

creating a "race of criminals." His book was an overnight best-seller and an indictment of the film industry that Hays was powerless to counter. Newspapers and magazines publicized the charges and demanded change.

At the height of the publicity over the Payne Studies, the Catholic Church launched a Legion of Decency crusade to clean up the movies. The Church demanded that its 20 million members boycott films that were deemed "immoral." Unlike the loosely knit coalition of Protestant churches that had opposed the movies during the 1920s, the Catholic threat was frightening to the industry. Catholics were working class, heavily concentrated in urban areas and were good movie customers. The Church was also highly organized and controlled some 300 publications across the country. In 1933 several studios, especially Paramount, were facing bankruptcy. The depression had hit Hollywood with a box office collapse of major proportions--the industry averaged 100 million paid admissions in 1930--in 1933 figures had dropped to a mere 60 million per week and threatened to continue downward. When some seven million Catholics took the Legion pledge not to attend "immoral" movies it was not unrealistic to suppose that an effective Catholic boycott might force several studios out of business.

It was never clearer that making movies in America was a collaborative, corporate art form. With the Catholic Church threatening national boycott, with threat of federal legislation constantly in front of Congress and with a shrill chorus of protest continuing from women's organization across the nation, the New York corporate offices began to listen more closely to Will Hays who preached that censorship would be good for the box-office. Hays negotiated a temporary truce with the church. The Catholics agreed not to institute a national boycott in return for appointing a Catholic censor and giving him broad power to enforce Father Lord's code. Hays and the MPPDA readily agreed. Hays also agreed that no film would be allowed to begin production without Breen's approval and further that no film would be distributed in the United States without a PCA seal.¹³

A key test case in the battle for control of films came up over a totally forgettable Hollywood costume drama. In the spring of 1934 Warner Bros. submitted a script for *Madame du Barry*. Very loosely based on the relationship between Louis XV and his last mistress, the Countess Marie B. du Barry, the film purported to be an historical account of events leading up to the French Revolution. In truth the film was nothing more than a bedroom farce with little, if any, historical veracity. An indication of the studios' concern for historical accuracy was reflected in its casting of the voluptuous Mexican siren Dolores Del Rio as the beautiful French mistress.

When the script arrived at Breen's office he immediately seized it as an example of the type of film that he believed Hollywood should not make. Breen shot back a stinging evaluation of the script to Jack Warner. In his opinion the script for *Madame du Barry* was so "filled with vulgarity, obscenity and blatant adultery" that it was "very dangerous from the standpoint of

industry policy" and would "involve the industry in serious controversy with France." The censor informed the studio that it was impossible to approve *Madame du Barry* for production.¹⁴

Breen's letter infuriated Warner Brothers. Jack Warner demanded a face to face confrontation with the new censor. His production boss, Hal Wallis, was determined to challenge Breen's authority. In a meeting with Warner, Wallis, director William Dieterle and screenwriter Edward Chodorov, Breen remained firm. The sex scenes, he claimed, were too explicit and too numerous and he demanded that all nude scenes be removed. He was horrified that Madame Du Barry was not only portrayed as a beautiful mistress, but was also presented as a "pimp" for the King who throughout the entire film "was nothing more than an old lech." How could the studio present a film to the American public that showed Du Barry redecorating the King's bedroom with ceiling mirrors? Moreover, the film put du Barry in a positive light. The film, Breen concluded, was unacceptable because it would "lower the moral standards of the audience."¹⁵

Wallis, whom Breen described as "sneering and argumentative," led the studio charge. He claimed *du Barry* was nothing more than a satirical account of "historical fact" and that anyone who objected had a "dirty mind." Wallis maintained that if Breen was going to demand that the industry not offend anyone then they might just as well "go into the milk business" because it will be "impossible for the film companies to make pictures" under these restrictions. Wallis refused to accept any of Breen's demands and ordered production to begin. Jack Warner, determined to keep control of his studio, took the train to New York to lobby his brothers to fight Hays and Breen.¹⁶

A little over a year after the crisis over *Gabriel Over the White House*, the MPPDA Board of Directors was summoned for another emergency meeting to discuss *Madame du Barry*. Louis B. Mayer led a contingent of industry leaders from Hollywood. Breen came to defend his position. Would the industry support Hays/Breen and by implication keep the deal struck with the Catholic Church? Or would they decided to support Warner Brothers? The future direction of the industry was on the line.

After a long and "animated discussion" which centered on the "danger to the investment of all the other companies" by the Warner practice of "making films filled with . . . smut" the MPPDA board instructed Mayer to work with Will Hays to bring the recalcitrant studio "in line." Hays then told Albert and Jack Warner that his office would refuse a distribution seal for *du Barry* unless it met industry standards. Warners caved in. Jack Warner called Wallis from New York and ordered him to cooperate fully with Breen. Warner gave his private assurances to Hays that *du Barry* would emerge from the studio as a moral film.¹⁷

But when *du Barry* was screened for the PCA staff, Breen rejected the film. Jack Warner was crushed. The studio had already invested tens of thousands of dollars in the film when he preceded with production without

Breen's approval. Now he faced the prospect of losing his entire investment if Breen refused a seal. Warner almost begged Breen to work with his head cutter to make *du Barry* moral. Breen agreed. He cut the opening scenes of *du Barry* and the King in bed, he eliminated the remaining references to mirrors over the bed, he trimmed all the shots of women in transparent nightgowns and suggestive costumes and eliminated most of the bedroom scenes. Whatever *du Barry* had been intended to be, it was no longer a bedroom farce. Breen issued a seal of purity to *du Barry*.¹⁸

The studio suffered another setback when the New York censorship board rejected *Madame du Barry* as "indecent, obscene and immoral." Ohio threatened to follow suit and only accepted the film after demanding additional cuts. Hays and Breen faced another crisis--if PCA standards were not acceptable to the local boards then there would be no reason for the studios to follow PCA demands. Hays recognized this and lobbied with both Ohio and New York to accept a new and revised edition of *Madame du Barry*--one that would carry an important new prologue that would explain to audiences the moral lessons of the debauchery that would follow.

In the reign of King Louis XV of France the Power and Glory of the French courts began to wane--Extravagance and Folly had succeeded at last in arousing in the breasts of the Common People the smoldering embers of Resentment and Revolt.

This picture portrays a King unmindful of his People--Selfish, arrogant, unscrupulous--a King who wrecks his Kingdom and bequeaths the ruins to his incompetent grandson.

It is a picture to ponder in the light of the succeeding revolution for Freedom, Equality and Human Brotherhood.

New York relented--*Madame du Barry* was morally safe for the Empire State.¹⁹

It might have been safe, but with the cuts imposed on Warner Brothers by Breen, Hays, the New York and the Ohio censorship boards, *Madame du Barry* was completely incomprehensible. *Variety* labeled the film a "travesty" on historical fact.²⁰ *The New York Times* blasted the film as "blurred" and wondered why it failed to clarify the relationship between Du Barry and the King. After suffering through the film the reviewer hoped he might have the "privilege of wringing Miss Del Rio's lovely neck." He might have been more satisfied had he wrung the censor's necks instead. While *Madame du Barry* would not have been a great film with or without the interference from the censors, the insistence that the film not deal realistically with the sexual relationship between Du Barry and Louis XV made the entire project pointless. Predictably the film bombed at the box-office, a point that did not upset Hays or Breen.

Throughout the rest of the decade Breen and Hays worked together to reconstruct political and social films. When MGM submitted a script based on Sinclair Lewis' *It Can't Happen Here*, Breen branded the script "inflammatory" and demanded so many changes that MGM backed out of the project. The studio ran into similar problems with Fritz Lang's *Fury* (MGM, 1936). Lang, who fled Nazi Germany in 1933, soon discovered that censorship existed in America. Lang proposed a powerful anti-lynching film. When Breen read the first script he informed MGM that *Fury* could not deal with racial prejudice, criticize Southern law enforcement officials, nor be "a travesty of justice" story. After several rewrites, Breen accepted the script. The results were obvious to film critic Otis Ferguson who wrote in *The New Republic* that *Fury* was "a desperate attempt to make love, lynching and the Hays office come out even." The movie code was at work, Ferguson noted, when the movie had the Southern sheriff stand "like Jesus Christ with a rifle" in front of his jail while the mob pelts him with stones.²¹

Breen was unconcerned with the view of movie critics. He wrote to Hays in early 1937 that there was a "definite trend away from serious drama." He told his boss he saw "no indication, anywhere, of any plans to produce pictures dealing with . . . social or sociological questions." Even Shakespeare, he told Hays, "seems to be dead on his own doornail." Breen's control over content was complete. But late in the spring of 1937 a social film would cross Breen's desk. Confident of his position and authority, Breen's position on Samuel Goldwyn's production of *Dead End* would illustrate how censorship and economics went hand in hand.

In March, 1936, Samuel Goldwyn, his wife Frances, and director William Wyler, went to the Belasco Theater in New York to see Sidney Kingley's smash hit *Dead End*. The setting for the play is the "dead end" of a New York street which runs into the East River. On one side of the street is the back entrance of the East River Terrace apartment building, home for the rich and powerful of New York. A dock juts out from the building where the boats and yachts of the occupants are moored. To these people depression is simply a psychological state of mind. A sturdy masonry wall, guarded by a row of spikes on top, separates the wealthy residents of East River Terrace from the squalid tenement buildings that line the other side of the street. For one day, the time period for the play, the privileged class of America is forced to use the back entrance while street repairs are made in the front of its building.

As they leave from their back door, they are suddenly forced to encounter American's poor for whom depression is a state of being; emotionally, socially and economically. Survival is their goal. The streets are littered with garbage, laundry clutters the windows and fire escapes, the noise is deafening and the scorching heat of summer suffocating. The East River provides little relief because it is covered by a "swirling scum" caused by city sewers constantly vomiting their guts into it.

Into this environment are thrust the characters whose lives will be, or have been, determined by which side of the wall they live on. The hero of the play is Gimpty, so called because he suffered rickets as a kid growing up on these very streets. He is a product of the local gangs, but managed to finish high school and go on to college. He graduated with a degree in architecture and yearns to build homes for the poor. Yet the American dream has eluded him. Betrayed by the depression, which has forced his return to poverty, he spends his days searching for work or daydreaming about tearing down the tenements and replacing them with good, clean public housing. "When I was in school, they used to teach us that evolution made men out of animals. They forgot to tell us it can also make animals out of men."²²

The two female characters are Drina and Kay. Drina lives in the tenements and dreams about escaping. Her parents are dead and she is struggling to support herself and her younger brother Tommy. But it is an almost hopeless task. Drina is a hard-working girl who is out on strike, desperate for the few dollars more a week that will allow her to escape this neighborhood. While she is on the picket lines she and her fellow strikers are beaten by the police. Tommy, with little supervision, is getting wilder by the day. Her counterpart is Kay, whose origins are working class, but who now lives with her rich boyfriend in the East River Terrace. She is smartly dressed and about to leave on a long trip on her lover's boat. Kay and Gimpty have fallen in love, yet it is clear that they will never be able to find happiness together. His hopeless poverty, and her fear of a return to it, prevent them from developing a relationship.

The focal point of the play is a gang of young street kids in training to be criminals. Tommy, the gang leader, T.B., nicknamed for the disease he carries, Dippy, Angel, Spit and Milty wile away their days by skipping school, swimming in the filth of the river, stealing whatever and whenever they can, playing cards and getting into fights with rival gangs or each other. They are dirty, rough, foul-mouthed kids. Violence is a natural part of their existence. While they are essentially "harmless" at this stage, several have already tasted "reform school," and it is clear that unless something dramatic happens they are destined to live a life of poverty or crime.

On the opposite side of the street is Phillip Griswald; a rich kid who lives in the new apartment building. Griswald, separated from the street kids by the wall, has everything America can offer to its privileged class. Phillip has a rich father, a French Governess, a chauffeur, a swimming pool and even a doorman who protects him from the street urchins.

The real villain of the play is the environment, but the characterization of the villain is Baby Face Martin, a wanted killer who has come back to his old neighborhood to visit his mother and see his girl. Martin, who is a boyhood chum of Gimpty, has undergone plastic surgery to disguise his identity, but is recognized by Gimpty. They were both full of promise as kids. Gimpty went to college; Martin turned to crime. Baby Face laughs at Gimpty's

circumstances. Six years of college and what have you got, he asks? "You have to take what you want if you want to get ahead in this world," he tells Gimpty. But the pressure of living in the "dead end" is about to turn Martin's homecoming into a nightmare. When he sees his mother she calls him a killer, a butcher and curses the day she gave birth. "I ought to be cut open . . . fer givin' yuh life," she screams. She refuses any of the "blood money" he offers her. Baby Face's nightmare continues when he finds Francey, the girl of his dreams, has turned into a cheap whore, infected with V.D. Life in the tenements has claimed another victim.

Two events illustrate the hopelessness of life on these dead end streets. Gimpty who is no physical match for Baby Face, and can see of no other way to escape his own personal dead end, rats on Baby Face to the FBI for the reward money. In a dramatic gun battle Baby Face kills an FBI agent before he is gunned down. The gang meanwhile has been entertaining themselves by beating up Phillip Griswald. When Griswald's father finds out he charges out into the street and grabs Tommy, who stabs him in the hand with a knife. Tommy is arrested and Drina and Gimpty plead with Griswald for compassion. Gimpty tells Griswald: "Martin was a killer, he was bad, he deserved to die, true! But I knew him when we were kids. He had courage. He was a born leader. He even had a sense of fair play. But living in the streets kept making him bad . . . then he was sent to reform school. Well, they reformed him all right! They taught him the ropes. He came out tough and hard and mean, with all the tricks of the trade." Griswald is unmoved.

The play ends with the police taking Tommy off to jail and Gimpty promising Drina that he will use his reward money to hire a lawyer for Tommy. The rest of the gang is stoic. As T.B. tells them "yuh loin a barrel a good tings at rifawn school." The audience is left to its own conclusion. Tommy might be freed and Gimpty and Drina could marry and live happily-ever-after on the reward money. Or the system could crush another life and sentence Tommy to a reform school so that he could become the next Baby Face Martin.

Goldwyn was overwhelmed by the play and immediately decided to bring it to the screen. He ordered his agent to pay whatever it cost for the screen rights (he paid Kingsley \$165,000). With the rights secured, he sailed for Europe.

From the start it seemed like a strange project for Goldwyn, one of Hollywood's most successful independent producers. Goldwyn, like the major studios, had always favored "entertainment" before "message" in his productions. He shunned the "realistic" style adopted by Warner Brothers, and even refused to make gangster films in the early 1930s when they were the rage of the industry because he believed they were a bad influence on children. Instead he tried to infuse his films with the "Goldwyn touch," a combination of flashy production, stylistic entertainment and expensive talent. He was "the Ziegfeld of the Pacific," quipped *New York Times* reviewer Frank Nugent.²³

Would that approach to filmmaking work on a project set in the slums with a stronger social message than conventional Hollywood entertainment? Could Hollywood make a film, given the restraints imposed by the Hays Office, "of the filth, foul language, cruelty, crime, prostitution, syphilis, and crushing despair bred by tenements" that marked *Dead End*?²⁴

Goldwyn assembled an impressive production team/cast for *Dead End*. He hired William Wyler to direct, Lillian Hellman to adapt the play to the screen, signed designer Richard Day, who won an Oscar for his set design on *Dodsworth*, to construct the set, and hired Gregg Toland as cinematographer. Humphrey Bogart was brought over from Warner Brothers to play Baby Face and Sylvia Sydney came on loan from Walter Wanger for Drina. A Goldwyn contract player, Joel McCrea, was penciled in for the lead role. And from New York he brought the "Dead End Kids"--Leo Gorcey, Huntz Hall, Gabriel Dell, Bernard Punsley, Bobby Jordan and Billy Halop.

Goldwyn was well aware that there would be censorship problems with bringing the play to the screen. He and Lillian Hellman had successfully taken the lesbian theme out of her play *The Children's Hour* and brought an homogenized version, *These Three*, to the screen. Would the Hays Office and the PCA allow the film to deal with the issue of abject poverty in America? The real message of the play was that there were two classes--the privileged and the oppressed. Where you were born, not how hard you worked, determined your class. It was not a message that Hollywood films had pushed. Anticipating a battle with the censors Goldwyn announced with typical Hollywood fanfare that "it is about time Hollywood did something of significance to public welfare as well as the usual trivia. This play . . . is one of the greatest social documents ever written."²⁵ Privately he instructed Lillian Hellman to "clean up the play." She recalled somewhat more vividly that what he meant was "to cut off its balls."²⁶

It was obvious to everyone that many of the details of the play--the diseased prostitute, the mistress of a married man, the brutal killing of a policeman, the vulgar language and the criminal activities of the kids--would have to be expunged from the film. Wyler quickly discovered that Goldwyn was fearful of too much realism being injected into the film. While the director wanted to shoot the film in the slums of New York to bring a visual starkness to the film that the play contained, Goldwyn insisted that the film be shot on the lot with an elaborate set built by Day. The set cost almost \$100,000 to build, and was universally praised by the critics. Wyler branded it "phony."²⁷ While the production staff worked hard to litter the set with garbage, Goldwyn cleaned it up. When Wyler protested that slums have dirt, Goldwyn countered with: "Well, this slum cost a lot of money. It should look better than an ordinary slum."²⁸

But Goldwyn, in addition to being a fuss-budget, anticipated the reaction of Breen and the PCA to the film. When the first script hit Breen's desk he

fired seven pages of "suggestions" back to Goldwyn. Do not show, or emphasize, "the presence of filth or smelly garbage cans, or garbage floating in the river" the censor warned. In true Hollywood fashion Goldwyn had fresh fruit trucked in daily to "litter" the set with. Breen warned Goldwyn to "be less emphatic, throughout, in the photographing of this script in showing the contrast between conditions of the poor in tenements and those of the rich in apartment houses." He insisted that the language of the kids be cleaned up, the reference to venereal disease be purged, the violence be tamed and that Baby Face not be allowed to kill a policeman. Yet even PCA officials were taken with the play. They called it "magnificently alive" and a "sincere and ruthless document." There was no determination, as there was with Sinclair Lewis' *It Can't Happen Here*, to keep *Dead End* off the screen.²⁹

And that fact makes *Dead End* stand out even fifty years after its production. The startling point of the film is not how much of the play was removed from the film, but how much of the social commentary survived both Samuel Goldwyn and Joseph Breen. It is true that some points were softened. The garbage may be sanitized and the set may not be as realistic as Wyler wanted, but the film still gives an overriding sense of hopelessness. There is no mention of venereal disease, but only the very young and the extremely naive would fail to understand what Francey suffered from and what repelled Baby Face. The kids don't curse and don't seem quite as bad in the film as in the play, yet it is clear that they have little education, no skills and are destined to a life in the slums. Drina is a stronger character--not beaten down by her poverty, but a determined young woman who is fighting for a better life. But despite her best efforts, she fails to keep Tommy out of trouble and her only hope is Dave's reward money. Dave emerges in the film as an all-American movie hero. Tall and handsome, Dave is not intimidated by Baby Face. He challenges his every move and in the end kills the criminal in a typical Hollywood gun fight. While this Hollywood convention seems a bit silly, it does not alter the fact that Dave is unemployed despite his college education. His dreams of a better world remain dreams. Nor does the film lapse into the saccharin ending it might have with Griswald or the courts forgiving Tommy and Drina and Dave marrying and moving to the suburbs.

Despite the strong social commentary, Breen and the PCA support and encouraged Goldwyn throughout the production process. They met privately during production to work out agreements on how far *Dead End* could go in its message of poverty and despair in America's urban slums. In exchange for lessening the violence, in cleaning up the kids and Francey, in cutting some of Dave's (Gimpty's) harangues about injustice, Breen agreed to lobby women's groups throughout the country in support of the film and to press the British censor to approve the film for the British market. Breen arranged for Goldwyn to make a personal presentation before the New York censorship board and in a letter to the board stressed that *Dead End* was, in his view, a

"strong plea for slum elimination and better housing as . . . crime prevention."³⁰

With the agreement in place, Breen issued seal #3596 to *Dead End* and told Will Hays that in his opinion the film was a "distinctive artistic achievement" which carried an "important social and sociological message." The New York board passed the film as did every other state censorship board. Great Britain accepted *Dead End* without any cuts which as one historian has noted was "a far cry from earlier attitudes to the American gangster film."³¹ When Austria banned the film Breen wrote to the censor, Dr. Paul Korets, and told him the film was an "important social document" and had been "widely acclaimed" in the United States. The ban was lifted. Only in Italy was Breen unsuccessful. *Dead End* was branded as "pro-communist" by the Mussolini government.³²

The obvious question is why did Breen and the PCA support *Dead End* when so many other films with social messages, like *Black Legion* (WB, 1936), *Black Fury* (WB 1935), *Fury* (MGM, 1936), to name just a few, were much more thoroughly purged of their social content? Perhaps the reason is that the Catholic Church, with its urban base, was familiar with the conditions described in the play and in the film. Working with kids from depressed families, the Catholic Church had seen thousands of Tommys' turn into hardened criminals, had seen the Drinas' of this world fight to maintain decency in a world of poverty. In 1936 *The Catholic World* advocated stage censorship yet praised *Dead End* as a play full of "economic and social significance" which should double "subscriptions this winter to the Boys' Club and the Boy Scouts." The Catholic Legion of Decency strongly recommended the film to all Catholics. Breen, aware of this support for *Dead End*, cleaned up some of the details, but left the message intact.³³

But the example of *Dead End* illustrates how deeply the PCA cut into the fabric of the Hollywood system. The process of adoption was tightly controlled by the producer and the PCA. Both established tight boundaries within which the film must stay. In return for those limitations the PCA gave not only a seal, but active support. In lobbying for support with women's organizations, opening foreign markets, the PCA put clear financial reward behind cooperation. It was less costly to agree before production on what could stay in the film, and it was also clearly more profitable to have the PCA fighting for you with foreign censors than fighting against you. The censorship system that evolved in Hollywood during the thirties was economic as well as moral and political. It came to have the full support of the owners and producers, if not the writers and directors.

The PCA report for 1937 is telling. In that year the PCA drafted 6,477 opinions on scripts, examined 379 books, short stories and plays for their suitability for the screen, inspected 2,584 scripts and viewed 1,489 films. In addition they had 1,478 private meetings with writers, directors and producers.³⁴ By the end of the decade, Breen's power was so entrenched that John

Steinbeck's powerful critique of the American economic system, *The Grapes of Wrath*, could be brought to the screen without a whimper. The politics written out of the script, Breen told Hays the film was a modern day "covered wagon" epic. Like the pioneers, Breen saw the Joads going west in search of a better life and while conditions depicted in the film were "shocking" they were all counter-balanced by "good images" and, most importantly, an "unlifting ending."³⁵

How does one then interpret the movies? Is it important to even consider who was primarily responsible for the images and messages that were in films during its golden era? Does it really matter that the films were censored during the production process? Do we need to understand the impact and motives of the Catholic Church, the PCA, the state censorship boards, and foreign censorship boards to understand American movies?

It is essential to understand both the intent of censorship and how it functioned within the studio system because the censorship of Hollywood films was primarily a censorship of ideas. The intent of the reformers was to prevent mass entertainment films from challenging the moral, political or economic status quo. They began with a moral crusade against Hollywood, but quickly became "an instrument for suppressing thought."³⁶ The Catholic Church feared that films would undermine its role as moral guardian and pressured Hollywood to promote a view of society that upheld the authority of church and state as equal partners. Will Hays and Joseph Breen accepted that goal and added their own--increasing the market for films by eliminating any controversial topic that might inhibit box-office appeal.

While in 1934 it may have appeared that the pro-censorship lobby was so powerful, it could not be resisted, in fact, the movement was at best a loosely knit coalition of disparate groups. Internally, the Catholic Church was badly split over the Legion of Decency movement. Protestant groups which had howled for years for censorship of movies, were from the more extreme branches and were sympathetic to Catholics only on the issue of censorship. A more cautious approach to the issue might have predicted that "once the principle of censorship gains sway, the fanatic and not the liberal will be in the saddle, and the possibility of experimentation to develop in moviedom a technique for handling any" social or political theme in an "intelligent, and civilized manner will be entirely stifled."³⁷

That is precisely what happened in Hollywood. Breen became more and more difficult as the years went by. There would be very few films like *Dead End* that emerged from the pre-production censorship process with a message intact. As long as the industry was determined to reach the largest possible market it was susceptible to economic blackmail, whether from religious organizations, special interest groups, or foreign governments. As Ruth Ingliss observed in her classic study of Hollywood, Breen and the PCA did not encounter an industry "champing at the bit with eagerness to bring challenging ideas and images to the screen."³⁸ Ben Ray Redman, writing in *The Saturday*

Review of Literature, warned readers that while the censorship system, "is conspicuously moral; at heart it is purely commercial." The system was "calculated to save the picture-makers time, trouble, and money--above all money."³⁹ As one close observer of the industry wrote in 1935, "outside their own temples of temperament, the producers had to consider the bankers, the churches, the prohibitionists, the educators, racial prejudices, touchy foreign governments, exhibitors, and an altogether too capricious public. If they offended in any quarter they were met with reprisals which hit them in their pocketbooks."⁴⁰

In the end they decided that it was easier to eliminate ideas than to try to limit audiences by age groups or make films for specialized, if limited, markets. Yet in so doing they also agreed to censor all discussion of contemporary issues. To Ben Ray Redman "this censorship, in its largest and most minute manifestations, is nothing but a reflection of their [the owners] greeds and fears." It is this censorship that "makes most Hollywood pictures the emasculated, empty, and meaningless things they are."⁴¹ Worth M. Tippy, director of the Federal Council of Churches, and an early advocate of some type of control of the movies, agreed when he quickly recognized that the new regulations imposed by the PCA were much too restrictive. The PCA regulations would not, he wrote, allow a "notable and wholesome film" like Fritz Lang's *M* nor Warner Brothers *I am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang*. Was that the purpose of self-regulation, he wondered? Did not Hollywood have a right to "portray vested evils and entrenched privileges in their true light?" *The Nation* agreed when it complained that if the movies were not allowed to "interpret morals, manners, economics, or politics" what was left?⁴² Perhaps the claptrap that Selznick saw that morning he and Hecht reflected on their Hollywood careers.

Kansas City, Missouri

Notes

1. Alva Johnston, "Profiles: Czar and Elder," *The New Yorker* (June 9, 1933) 58. See also Herbert Corey, "How Hays Made the Sun Shine," *Nation's Business* (Oct 1929) 45-46; Albert Shaw, "Will Hays: A Ten Year Record," *Review of Reviews* (March 1932) 30-31; Will Hays, *The Memoirs of Will Hays* (1955).

2. Ben Hecht, *A Child of the Century* (1954) 469.

3. 467.

4. "Forgotten Children," *The Nation* (Oct. 18, 1933) 458.

5. 458.

6. Daniel Lord, *Played By Ear* (1955) 274-275. See also Lord, *Fashionable Sin: A Modern Discussion of an Unpopular Subject* (1929).

7. Several recent studies have addressed the issue of censorship. See Leonard J. Leff and Jerold L. Simmons, *Dame in The Kimono: Hollywood, Censorship, & The Production Code From the 1920s To The 1960s* (1990); Gerald Gardner, *The Censorship Papers: Movie Censorship Letters*

from the Hays Office, 1934-1968 (1987); Thomas Schatz, *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (1988).

8. Film scholars have a rich body of archival material available to them. Production Code Administration records are available at the Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Beverly Hills, California. The Will Hays Papers are at the Indiana State Historical Society, Indianapolis, Indiana. The Daniel Lord Papers are located at the Jesuit Missouri Province Archives, St. Louis, Missouri. The Martin Quigley Papers are deposited in the Special Collection Department at the Georgetown University Library, Washington, D. C. Studio records are also available. Warner Bros. materials are deposited in the Special Collections Department at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California and at the Wisconsin State Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin. UCLA also has a large collection of studio materials available to scholars.

9. *New York Times*, Jan. 2, 1928.

10. *Variety*, Jan. 21, 1931.

11. James Wingate to Will Hays, Feb. 7, 1933, *Gabriel Over the White House*, PCA file.

12. Wingate to Thalberg, Feb. 8, 1933, *ibid.*

13. Gregory D. Black, "Hollywood Censored: The Production Code Administration and the Hollywood Film Industry, 1930-1940," *Film History* (1989) 167-189.

14. Breen to Jack Warner, Mar. 13, 1934, *Madame du Barry*, PCA Files.

15. Breen to File, Mar. 14, 1934; Breen to Warner, Mar. 15, 1934, *ibid.*

16. *Ibid.*

17. Hays to Albert Warner, Mar. 28, 1934; Hays memo to File, Apr. 3, 1934, *ibid.*

18. H. J. McCord to Breen, May 5, 1934, *ibid.*

19. Albert Howson to Hays, Sept. 25, 1934, *ibid.*

20. *New York Times*, Oct. 25, 1934; *Variety*, Oct. 30, 1934.

21. Breen to Warner, June 18, 1936, *Black Legion*, PCA Files; Breen to Mayer, Jan. 27, 1936, *Fury*, PCA Files; "Hollywood's Half a Loaf," *The New Republic* (June 10, 1936) 130.

22. Sidney Kingsley, *Dead End* (1936) 50.

23. Arthur Marx, *Goldwyn* (1976) 203.

24. "Dead End," *Literary Digest* (Sept. 4, 1937) 30.

25. *Dead End* Press Book, PCA files.

26. A. Scott Berg, *Goldwyn* (1989) 290.

27. Alex Madsen, *William Wyler* (1973) 155-57.

28. Leonard J. Leff and Jerold L. Simmons, "No Trollops, No Tomcats," *American Film* (December, 1989) 43.

29. Breen to Goldwyn, April 23, 1937; PCA Review, Oct. 28, 1935; Breen to B. B. Kahane (RKO), Nov. 6, 1935, *Dead End*, PCA Files.

30. Conference on *Dead End*, April 27, 1937; Wingate to Breen, Aug. 6, 1937, *ibid.*

31. James C. Robertson, *The British Board of Film Censors: Film Censorship in Britain, 1896 - 1950*, (London, 1985) 81.

32. Breen to Goldwyn, Dec. 22, 1937, *ibid.*

33. Euphemia Van Rensselaer Wyatt, "What About Stage Censorship?" *The Catholic World* (June, 1936) 323.

34. Elizabeth Yetman, "The Catholic Movie Censorship," *The New Republic* (Oct. 5, 1938) 234.

35. Breen to Hays, Sept. 29, 1939, *The Grapes of Wrath*, PCA Files.

36. Robert Forsythe, "Who Speaks for Us?" *New Theater* (Aug. 3, 1936) 6.

37. Edward Isreal, "Movies and Morals," *The Forum* (Oct. 1934) 201.

38. Ruth Ingliss, *Freedom of the Movies* (1947) 183.

39. Ben Ray Redman, "Pictures and Censorship," *The Saturday Review of Literature* (Dec. 31, 1938) 3.

40. *Harper's* (Mar. 1935) 480.

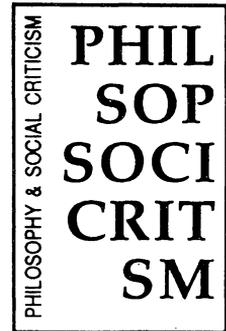
41. Redman 3.

42. "The Movie Boycott," *The Nation* (July 11, 1934) 34.

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