

Self-Regulation and the Classical Hollywood Cinema

Janet Staiger

Censorship is not something someone else does to us; it is what we do to ourselves. Understanding why we self-regulate our sensory experiences, how and what we choose to regulate, and its functions--economic and psychic--seem critical in dealing with the history of representation in the classical Hollywood cinema. This is, of course, why concerns about the methods for investigating films in their historical context are worth the discussion afforded them in Gregory D. Black's and G. Thomas Poe's essays.

Let me first clear some ground. Self-regulation of moving images did not begin with the Catholic Legion of Decency's threatened boycott in the early 1930s, leading to the enforcement of the Production Code through financial penalties.¹ Self-regulation did not start with the Arbuckle scandal in the early 1920s, provoking the film industry to bring in Will Hays as its moral guardian. Self-regulation also did not first appear in 1909 when the American film industry cooperated with the People's Institute in New York City to form a National Board of Censorship. Self-regulation did not begin when the original kinetoscope images of a dancing Fatima brought out the local image regulators, and the early film companies learned that some genres were going to be more troublesome than others.

Self-regulation started decades or centuries earlier. Self-regulation started when individuals within social circumstances found it opportunistic (psychologically, sociologically, politically, and economically) to deny or reject some images in favor of others. Whether you turn to a Freudian theory of the unconscious or to Foucault's theses that repression is a conscious and political act of power, it is obvious that western civilization has regulated its images and sounds for some reason (or reasons) and for some time. Moving pictures, or those pictures produced in mainstream U.S. film production, are scarcely unusual in becoming the target of debate over what will be represented and in what manner.

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People must get something out of removing some images and sounds from their sensual input. Both Black and Poe suggest from their own theoretical frameworks reasons by which to account for this phenomenon. Black points out that abiding by the more stringent prevailing moral and political norms was economically advantageous to a national film industry. If no one is offended, everyone might come to the movies--which in the 1930s became just "fluff" or "harmless entertainment."² Thus, Black implies not only a rationale for the industry's accepting the deletion of some experiences but also the counter offering of pleasures which were tolerable and consumable to potential purchasers of movie tickets. Poe's philosophical position is that ideologically and psychically all texts are already censored. They can never represent reality (e.g., be "full"), for in becoming texts gaps and silences must necessarily exist, minimally at least between what is representing and what is represented. Furthermore, any text exists in conflict, "between its function as an ideological apparatus and its necessity to entertain, to produce pleasure (and I do not believe these two operations are necessarily one and the same.)" Poe's position is that gaps and silences may or may not be pleasurable for the spectator, but they are always ideological, having some mediated relation to the social formation which produced them.

Both of these positions, while different in theoretical framework and methods for research, do have at least two features in common: both suggest an Other doing something to the self and both believe censorship has some relationship to pleasure or its lack. Thus, binary oppositions structure both positions. For Black, specific social groups find offensive some images or ideas, preventing the enjoyment of some people but producing "harmless entertainment." For Poe, the logic of western epistemology, an ideological (il)logic, is not necessarily always capable of disguising itself or preventing people from finding their own pleasures in a text it has "censored." Where Black sees groups of people in conflict Poe sees structures and individual readers in (occasional) contention.

Why do we censor? How do we explain it? Christian Metz provides a valuable observation in his *The Imaginary Signifier*.³ He suggests three machines or apparatuses operate to maximize a (heterosexual male) spectator's pleasure in filmgoing. The first machine is the cinema industry "which works to fill cinemas, not to empty them." The second machine is internal rather than external. It is the social/psychological development of the individual within historical circumstances. This development is arranged in social reality so that institutions are organized in ways that mobilize the spectator's desire to view movies: society will "set up arrangements whose aim and effect is to give the spectator the 'spontaneous' desire to visit the cinema and pay for his [sic] ticket." Metz points out that these two machines usually operate together, particularly for commercial cinemas: "the libidinal economy (filmic pleasure in its historically constituted form) reveals its 'correspondence' with the political economy (the current cinema as a commercial enterprise), and it is,

moreover--as the very existence of 'market research' shows--one of the specific elements of that economy. . . ." Metz's third machine is amusing: it is the historians, theorists, and critics who find various reasons to investigate cinema, substantiating the secret pleasure we have in its activities by claiming to provide scholarly insights. He summarizes this third machine as "voyeuristic sadism sublimated into epistemophilia."

Drawing on Freud, what Metz argues further about the way films are constructed, prior to any social legislation of their images, is that movies are founded on a give and take, on a need to contain in order to reveal. Pleasure operates in not having accessible at every moment everything you want. Pleasure functions from delay and then fulfilment of desire. Thus, containment is part of, and necessary for, pleasure. Such a containment, other psychoanalysts point out, also produces a sadism, a forceful structuring of material reality to operate as the viewer desires the world to exist. Anthropologists and sociologists concur while providing different theories. Containment permits mastery of an environment, and this is important for the social ordering of the subject within groups.⁴

Even Foucault, who might rail against abuses of power implicit in who is permitted to structure "good" and "bad" behavior, recognizes that containment sets up categories and hierarchies which structure perceptions. While he asserts that assuming essential orders has potential social and political implications, his work on sexuality offers cases of societies' manipulating the meaning of pleasurable acts for the advantage of some individuals.

Now something Black only obliquely points out seems relevant: everyone (except perhaps pre-adolescent children) knew in the 1930s that censorship occurred. The acts of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association, the Hays and Breen offices, and the Legion of Decency were widely reported in newspapers and fan magazines. People knew when they went to the movies that some set of protocols could control and contain the variety of images they were about to see. They also knew, as we know, that those protocols had a certain strength in social and political bases. They were not mere local whims of the producers or Catholic church members. Those protocols, not at all hegemonic, were openly discussed as variable, depending upon individual beliefs. The Production Code, in fact, made those boundaries obvious in explicit statements of what could and could not be shown. Women who were adulterous were to be punished. Sexual perversions were prohibited from being represented. Stereotypes offensive to minorities were discouraged.

One wonders, in fact, if knowing that movies were censored made it more fun, or at least suspenseful. It hardly takes a deconstructionist critic or a well-researched historian to guess that representing the life of the courtesan Madame Du Barry in 1934 is going to require some subterfuge on the part of the filmmakers. No one expected, I would think, a literal documentary of Louis XV's affairs with his mistress. In fact, for the egotistical spectator,

couldn't that gap be part of pleasure? Couldn't seeing how far Warner Bros. could go be a sort of playground for flexing mental fantasies?

Both Black and Poe seem to assume that censorship is totally unpleasurable--at least to those experiencing it, that to see or hear everything would give maximum satisfaction. But the analyses of the individual provided by Freud, Foucault, and others argue against such a conclusion. Instead, these theorists point out how much pleasure is determined by the regulation (or oscillation as Poe puts it) of what and when we see and hear the "forbidden." Additionally, Freud and Foucault indicate that we compensate for not seeing what we cannot tolerate seeing (psychically and socially). Regulation is, I think, a better term for this process than censorship. Furthermore, it is self-regulation. Spectators who accept the protocols are knowledgeable about what they have chosen not to consume and what they are willing to accept as compensations and rewards for that denial.

Now, indeed, the question becomes, not why did the industry and the American population self-regulate its cinema but, for whose benefit does this regulation exist? Is there a way to use Metz's and Foucault's observations to explain why the American film industry and many Americans went along with "self-regulation"? For surely, if the majority of people were so deeply disturbed by the film industry's capitulation to moral guardians, legions of decency, and political opportunists, the general box office would have significantly fallen off.⁵ Remember, Metz cautions us to recognize how interconnected the psychic economy is with capitalism. What did the spectator get for what he or she gave up?

This, of course, is a textual issue. Furthermore, and responding to the historian's concern, local circumstances must be accounted for. What I might ask, then, is, for what historically specific psychological and political benefit is it that partisan politics and humor is regulated in *Gabriel Over the White House*, sexuality in *Madame Du Barry*, and class in *Dead End*? How do those benefits parcel themselves out to various "selves" existing within the American population going to the movies in the 1930s? What pleasures existed in paying for the containment that those movies might offer? How far could they go? (For Black notes that in the case of *Madame Du Barry* the "balance" did go awry. It was a "bomb" in the theaters.)

If I were to talk about the conjunctions of historical research and textual analysis, I would look neither solely to the industry nor to the text but primarily and additionally to the historical spectator. Who is getting what pleasures from each instance of self-regulation? How is the economic and libidinal apparatus functioning for the American population? Are the machines working together? Is pleasure being overdetermined or conflicted? And, equally importantly, who is not being served in this institutional arrangement? Several obvious exclusions come to mind for the cases studied by Black and Poe: women, homosexuals, political radicals, people of color. Additionally, since we can all be several selves at the same time, I would ask

which selves are being rewarded? Is there overdetermination or contradiction occurring even for "selves" being addressed or oppressed?

How would such a set of inquiries tackle the specific cases of *Gabriel Over the White House*, *Madame Du Barry* or *Dead End*? We have excellent discussions of the industrial situation and the textual operations from Black and Poe. I would like to see how well "censorship" worked by looking very briefly at reviews of the films by *The New York Times* and *Variety*. These two sources, while hardly representing the "average" American, might be said to interpret at least a popular opinion and a trade one. These few "responses" by consumers in the 1930s indicate that neither the work of the censors nor the activities of the text fully determined the experience. What was regulated was not necessarily what the censors thought ought to be. What was consumed was not always "inside" the text.

In the instance of *Gabriel Over the White House*, Black indicates that those wishing to alter the script were concerned that the film might be viewed as an attack on the Republicans and an implicit acquiescence towards non-democratic solutions to economic crises. He notes that Hays and his office staff were only partially successful in convincing MGM to make major changes. Poe's ideological analysis argues that the consequences of the actual film indicates a conflict between the humanity of Jud Hammond prior to his spiritual infestation and the theocratic logocentricism of a political solution which denies not only criminality and revolution but also love and desire and laughter. As *Gabriel over the White House* progresses, it offers less and less pleasure to the spectator, closing off a heteroglossia for a monoglot tirade. Only a small gesture of romance is available for the consumer's entertainment.

The reviews in *Variety* and the *New York Times* are particularly revealing for this film because they indicate how difficult it may be for us to cast ourselves back into the 1930s. *Variety* indicated that film did well with a Broadway audience, and the paper predicted a good box office because the movie would have popular appeal. In fact, *Variety* thought the film was very patriotic despite its reviewer indicating that the President seized control of the government by declaring martial law when Congress would not support him. The *New York Times* also inferred a lack of due process in the President's activities. Thus, the small censor gestures aimed at preventing the appearance of an illegal wresting of power by Hammond were unsuccessful in allying the interpretation that Hammond seized power rather than being given it.

What the two reviews particularly liked, however, does not arise in either Black's or Poe's discussions. *Variety's* reviewer picked out as especially satisfying Hammond's finale victory in which he has two battleships bombed by the US airforce: "the sequence has a whale of a melodramatic kick." The *New York Times* also believed the film was "a curious, somewhat fantastic and often melodramatic story, but nevertheless one which at this time is very interesting." Thus, the international diplomacy episode caught its fancy as well; it takes delight in the scene in which Hammond declares that debtor nations

will have to pay back loans owned to the United States even if the nations have to reduce military expenditures to do this.

Who then are the villains to these two spectators? Not the American people. But Congress, gangsters, and foreigners. Such an array of Others for American audiences to blame for their economic woes must have provided a powerful pleasure to counterbalance any losses from the declining attention to Malloy as a desirable woman, Hammond as an amusing reincarnation of Republican presidents, and American unemployed as empowered revolutionaries. Combined with the function of scapegoating is sadism. *Gabriel Over the White House* continually evokes violence as a desirable solution to economic problems. You have a bad president; let him have a car crash so that Gabriel, the angel of wrath, can inhabit his body. You have a revolution; let gangsters mow down the leader. You have gangsters; let the military summarily execute them in front of the Statue of Liberty. You have cheaters on loans, with foreign accents no less; threaten to wipe them out by building the world's largest military and bombing them like you do your own obsolete ships.

The pleasures of romance and heteroglossia may be contained as the *Gabriel Over the White House* progresses, but they are compensated for by patriarchal violence, sadistically controlling all that stands in the way of American capitalism's recovery from the depression. Hammond as a reincarnation of Gabriel, or Lincoln (and the *New York Times* noticed this), is justified by virtue of being above the law.⁶ Poe argues that what is censored in this film is other voices, particularly that of the criminal, the revolutionist, and, to some degree, the lover. Censored out is not the sexual functioning of Miss Malloy--she resumes her feminine role with Secretary Beekman--but voices which might raise issues such as alternative explanations of why the depression existed. Instead, the explanations offered are "fascist" and, according to Poe, so recognized by *The Nation* at the time. Thus, from evidence in two movie reviews of the period, self-regulation in this movie for its historical spectators is not about party politics or democratic processes. It is about American's response to domestic crises. In that censoring is, however, its compensation. Violence orders and contains the world for America. What is lost (romance, heteroglossia) is regained in other pleasures (melodramatic spectacle and sadism). The solution of our deficiencies and lacks is violence directed toward what is not "US." We bring evil to the surface in order to see evil so it may be punished.

Madame Du Barry, Black tells us, did poorly at the box office after its "vulgarity, obscenity and blatant adultery" were deleted. In fact according to Black, the film was so oblique that the reviewers complained that the relationships were unclear or even historically inaccurate. Here censorship seems to have worked too well. No compensations operated. Poe notes that censored out of the text were explicit scenes of sexuality, but that censorship produced an oscillation with the feminine as excess. Desire re-enters, as it

were, through Madame Du Barry's ability to "cure"--the king's boredom, some political difficulties, and his grandson's naiveté. Prologues claiming political messages about decadence and selfishness could not stifle foot fetishism.

Variety--usually a very sharp reader--catches on to the very conflict that Poe points out: "Script is a chameleon affair . . . in another moment [it] seeks to suggest that perhaps some of her devious ways achieved some good." *Variety's* low opinion of the movie, however, is also revealing. "'DuBarry' as a production is very Busby Berkeley . . . DuBarry, as one of the world's champ courtesans, is too vivid in public mind to be treated as frothily as this." Let's have some respect for success!

The *New York Times* concurs. "You will not discover in this 'Madame Du Barry' why [the fascinating courtesan] has excited the imaginations of the generations which followed her." Both reviews put part of the blame for this lack of catching the "real" Du Barry on the tone of the film. It is much too light. But the reviewers also indicate displeasure with Delores del Rio's performance. She is "rarely believable." She "fails rather definitely to come alive."

What is being regulated? I am tempted to say, along with Black and Poe, that it is the woman as enigma. Indeed, according to one of her court enemies, Du Barry's threat is that she is a thousand women, changing every day. Instead, it seems to me that the surfacing of just such a statement within the film itself suggests that something else is at stake. For we get to see many of those women. It is as though woman as excess and lack, as cure and disease, is too "on the surface" to be what has been hidden in order to be revealed. Nobody misses that Du Barry is a courtesan. What we miss is a couple more titillating jokes including having mirrors on the ceiling.

Rather significantly Du Barry/Del Rio's full bodily appearance is delayed until after the King's first pleasure with her has been consummated. Instead, as Poe neatly observes, she is initially fetishistically parceled out--here a foot, there a head. But when the film completes its image of her body, she appears (alone) in the royal bed. Merchants rush toward her, offering her consumable items. In her consternation, she mistakes who they are, crying, "Have they come to kill me?" "Not yet" is the answer that any knowledgeable spectator gives in response. No, first we will have a little fun before you are carted off into history. Furthermore, these words, her first breaking of a (textually) imposed silence, are overdetermined by the Latin accent that Del Rio--as an actress and not really Du Barry--could not hide.

This is no French lady. She is dark haired, exuberant, warm, erratic. She is given a small black boy to be her servant, but she elevates him to "governor." In fact, Du Barry/Del Rio is constantly set against the Anglos of the court--temperamentally, politically, socially. This lady does not fit; she does not belong. She is not "real." Attached to the (reprinted) *New York Times* review is a weird photograph. It is of Del Rio in a blonde wig that she wears only

once in the movie. Of course Del Rio must be expelled. She does not match ethnic prejudices; she does not fit our image of history; she is unreal.

What is occurring in this attempted regulation? What is the relation of pleasure to Du Barry for its historical spectator? It is difficult to tell from such a small investigation into what might be traces of interpretations. From textual and historical analysis based on two reviews, again, an Other, again a foreigner, is taking blame for the destruction of an Anglo country. In *Madame Du Barry*, over-consumption and excess while pleasurable as a short-term joke are also, ultimately, so threatening as to require containment. But historically in the middle of the depression, spending (economically, psychically) was also considered important for saving the US from financial stagnation. Nostalgic fantasies of the roaring twenties, of full employment and expansion of gross national products, underpinned many of the more successful instances of Hollywood's "harmless entertainment." Busby Berkeley musicals, also produced by Warner Bros. and within a couple years of this historical bio-pix, are usually considered good examples of such regulation of the spectators' pleasures. But excess in consumption apparently cannot be combined with foreignness at the same time. What seems at issue in the reviews from *Variety* and the *New York Times* is not merely Du Barry as enigma (lack and excess) but Del Rio as unbelievable (not US). If the film failed, I am hypothesizing, it is because Du Barry was doubly cursed as other: represented as woman and as foreigner, little sympathy could be expended toward her. Watching the excess of someone not like us was no compensation for spectacles of flesh and folly.

In the case of *Dead End*, Black argues Goldwyn chose to "clean up the play." Censors come from all parts of the machinery, including the producers. Eliminated from the dramatic version by Goldwyn were "the social evil" of venereal disease, adultery, a killing, and vulgar language as well as the dirt of poverty. Poe sees this censoring as inadequate. Spectators could find a pleasure in the carnivalism of the boys who seem quite happy with their lot in life. Such an anarchistic denial of social norms existed despite the dominant ideological message that hard work yielded its rewards.

While this seems a plausible reading of the probable effects of the film, neither *Variety* nor the *New York Times* supports totally the descriptions projected by Black or Poe. Critics of *Dead End* did not perceive that Goldwyn really cleaned up the movie in any significant way or that the movie gave any solution to the poverty it portrayed. The boys, however, were a source of delight but not necessarily for confronting norms. Rather they were viewed as unusually realistic images among the "harmless entertainment" usually offered by Hollywood.

Variety predicted bad business for *Dead End* because *Variety* considered the movie not entertaining: "There is no hope promised for a better day, no humor, no fun. Just dull, depressing existence, accurately and minutely reproduced in its sickening, physical phenomena." The *New York Times*, not

surprisingly, praised *Dead End* as a social protest film. Reviewers for the *Times* seldom agreed with the adage that messages should go by telegrams. In fact, *Variety* complained that the film was not strong enough in presenting a thesis: all *Dead End* did was present the same social message in the same form as the theatrical version. Goldwyn had not taken advantage of the medium of movies: "There is no inventiveness or imaginative use of the cinema to develop the theme further, or wham it as hard as the play."

The *New York Times* reviewer is less pessimistic than the *Variety* critic about the possible success of the film and believes that the "highlight" of the film is the "salty street jargon of the noted youngsters," which while cleaned up for the movies is "still authentic New Yorkese." *Variety*, of course, also knows the play so the cleansing provided by Goldwyn doesn't get by it: "The Barrie role is indefinite in outline, due to censoring. (Only wives live with gentlemen in motion pictures)." Another reviewer outside my sample writes: "Too bad Will Hays made Claire Trevor tubercular rather than syphilitic."⁷

Pleasure for these reviewers seems to be an assumed social and physical realism, particularly in the bodies and words of the boys. I get the sense, more in the case of *Dead End* than in *Gabriel Over the White House* or *Madame Du Barry*, that regulation is provoking some chaffing. Perhaps it is because this film is the closest to implying some direct relation to social conditions. *Gabriel Over the White House*, although contemporary, begins as a satire before taking on a more dramatic tone. Hence the propagandistic tone and fantasy removes the film from normal considerations of dramatic verisimilitude. *Du Barry*, too much a farce, finds itself criticized for its lack of realism. *Dead End* promises a smaller gap between the representation and what is represented. Where the reviewers can find apparent mimicry they find pleasure.

What does this excursion into a couple reviews of each of the three films tell us about self-regulation and the classical Hollywood cinema? First, it suggests that textual analysis may hold valuable methodological lessons for us. I have used the same type of textual analysis in my reading of the interpretations of the films that Poe used on the films themselves. However, textual analysis needs to be applied not only to films but to traces of spectators' responses to the pictures. This connects to a second point. No matter what censors may have tried to do to control spectators' reactions to the movies, the fact that spectators are well aware of censorship complicates the analysis. Spectators are quite a bit more sophisticated readers than the censor (or critic) might guess. However, Black's information about attempts to regulate gives us some sense of what protocols were operating in the industry as well as information about specific acts of deletion or addition which might have been widely known to spectators of the movies. This historical context is necessary for understanding any specific instance of censorship.

Thirdly, censorship needs to be considered in relation to regulation: to have the machinery of commercial cinema work, taking away some images and sounds must also mean the production of compensations--either in the giving

and taking of the images or the offering of alternative rewards in lieu of what has been denied. If *Gabriel Over the White House* takes away some of its humor and romance it also offers fantasies of mastery. Finally, regulation of images and sounds affects multiple "selves." If you review the analyses I did for *Variety* and the *New York Times*, you will notice that I (like Metz) assumed a heterosexual male spectator. This ideological assumption was intentional. The normative address in the classical Hollywood period would be for such a viewer, with some offerings toward a heterosexual female, hypothesized from the vantage point of patriarchy. That is, what the system assumed about females' viewing tastes would be within its notions of what a woman "was." I can imagine, however, quite different responses to these films were I to hypothesize my viewer as female or gay or an ethnic minority. But *Variety* and the *New York Times* could not give me any reasonable data about these spectators.

Self-regulation in the Hollywood era is about production intentions. It is about textual effects. It is also about multiple spectators responding to the offered ideologies and pleasures. We have a long way to go--historically and textually--before we begin to really write that account. And as deconstruction would remind us, we will also find our Selves faced with gaps, including those marking the gaps between our Selves and the historical Selves we wish to know. But since censorship has been tolerated, even permitted and enjoyed, for centuries, it seems likely that we will continue our "voyeuristic sadism," attempting to master the datae we collect into (only apparently) coherent stories about the cinema.

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Notes

1. The code itself does not change much between 1930 and 1934; what changes is its administration and the imposition of financial penalties for theaters that show non-Code films. In fact, the code of 1930/34 is very similar to guidelines used by the National Board of Censorship, founded in 1909.

2. This term used by Black to describe the movies is the title of an excellent study of Hollywood and its self-regulation. See Richard Maltby, *Harmless Entertainment: Hollywood and the Ideology of Consensus* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1983). An excellent analysis of the 1930-1934 period is also from Maltby in his "'Baby Face' or How Joe Breen Made Barbara Stanwyck Atone for Causing the Wall Street Crash," *Screen*, 27, no. 2 (March-April 1986) 22-45.

3. Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema* [1977], trans. Celia Britton, Annwyl Williams, Ben Brewster and Alfred Guzzetti (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1982) 7-8.

4. I am thinking here, for instance, of the sociological and anthropological work of Victor Turner or Mary Douglas.

5. We know that a drop in attendance in the fall 1931 season was short-lived once the industry instituted counter measures such as double features and give-aways. Additionally, some more riské films such as the Mae West movies seem to have re-generated interest in movies.

However, once a stricter censorship returns in the 1933-1934 period, attendance remains somewhat level.

6. This film is oddly prescient of *Young Mr. Lincoln* (1939) which has received an extensive and influential historical and ideological analysis of its censorship. See the Editors of the *Cahiers du cinema*, "John Ford's *Young Mr. Lincoln*," [1970], *Screen*, 13, no. 3 (Autumn 1972). Not only does Hammond seem another Lincoln but the same repression of sexual desire occurs as well as the treatment of Lincoln as authorized to act beyond mortal law.

7. Rob Wagner, *Rob Wagner's Script*, 18, no. 428 (11 September 1937) 10.

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