

Extended Essay

Sexuality and Ethnicity in Fifties and Sixties American Cinema:
The Effect of Religion and Politics

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Abstract

The aim of the investigation is to consider the effect of religion and politics on representations of sexuality and ethnicity in American film industry in the 1950s and 1960s, with focus on the Hollywood film. Interference was undertaken by the government and by established religious bodies to censor indecent film content, to eradicate anti-capitalist ideas, and to make film as part of the Cold War propaganda machine. In 1930, the MPPDA (Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors of America) assembled the Production Code to govern film content for the next three decades. The depiction of religious and ethnic groups and the depiction of sexual and criminal activity were carefully controlled, and always with usage of a most Catholic “filter”. Hollywood’s hypocrisy, the tradition of Victorian double standards of morality, was settled: cinema adopted its role as the guardian of public morals; it became a priest and a psychiatrist. The poorly enforced regulations of the Code were often circumvented, though, by witty wordplays or ambiguous implications.

In 1947, the Hollywood Blacklist was published. It was a record of motion picture entertainment professionals who were denied work due to their political beliefs or associations, whether they were factual or not. In the beginning of the 1950s, the restrictions of the MPAA lost their meaning, as audacious foreign films were not bound by the Production Code and could cross the threshold of censorship with ease. However, the blacklist had left a lasting mark on film production. The crooked, imbalanced republican government had managed to make most moviemakers turn a blind eye to the social evils. In fear of being sentenced or left without a job, numerous film artists became part of the propaganda machine in attempt to “improve” their image, even though it would have been possible to treat taboo subjects. My conclusion is that the MPAA, with both political and religious figures standing behind its actions, had a great effect on the representations of ethnicity and sexuality and, also, on the ways in which people are understood and experienced in the “real world”.

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Plan of Investigation

The focal aim of the investigation is to consider the effect of religion and politics on representations of sexuality and ethnicity in American film industry (with emphasis on Hollywood cinema, or more generally speaking, so-called dominant cinema) in the 1950s and 1960s. What does ‘the industry being affected’ imply, then?

Religious and political quarters not only supplemented films with their ideals, but also ordered pictures for propaganda purposes from the fearful contemporaries of Joseph McCarthy. During his office, American society was strongly anti-communist. The schizophrenic atmosphere resulted in many (often false) leftist accusations, the Hollywood blacklist and the Hollywood Ten. Of the unprecedented amount of motion pictures produced after World War II, nearly all were pro-American war films, in which communists (evilness) could be defeated on the condition that all ethnicities united. Some filmmakers, in fear of unemployment or imprisonment, became part of the propaganda system voluntarily, while others ended up doing studios’ odd jobs. All major studios were forced to glorify American ideals, or strictly speaking, the ethics of the republican government.

It is worthy to remember the influence concretely unobservable from the canvas, which in all its paradoxicality is nevertheless most visible: namely, the lack of crime, wrongdoing, evil and sin. “Priests negotiated with studios to eliminate certain scenes, reshoot or recut others, [or] change dialogue to make [a film] acceptable to the Catholic Church.”¹

The aforementioned motives will become building blocks in a study of sexuality and ethnicity, which is based on the following utterance: “Culture is politics by means of aesthetics.”²

The topic is worthy of study, because by studying film history, we can gain keen insights into the ways that different groups of people have been treated. Images of people on film actively contribute to the ways in which people are understood and experienced in the “real world”.³ The ramifications of ethnic (race) and sexual (gender) representations on film are substantial. Thus, film is a powerful medium with a potential to influence “real life” by manipulating one’s attitude and behaviour, as well as political, religious and other sociological opinions.

¹ Gregory D. Black, *The Catholic Crusade Against the Movies, 1940-1975*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 2

² Bill Nichols, *Film Theory and the Revolt Against Master Narratives* from Christine Gledhill, Linda Williams (eds), *Reinventing Film Studies*. London: Arnold, 2000, p. 39

³ Harry M. Benshoff, Sean Griffin, *America on Film: Representing Race, Class, Gender and Sexuality at the Movies*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2004, p. 3

Background

In the 1920s, cinema was still in its infancy, but already in ill fame. Film was born as a condemnable form of entertainment, characterized by audience-pleasing and unnecessary sex and violence. The indecent, immoral image of film business was further fed by star scandals, such as the drug-related death of actress Olive Thomas in 1920, the Arbuckle case in 1921 (in which comedian Roscoe “Fatty” Arbuckle was convicted for murder), and the murder of director William Desmond Taylor in 1922. By then, it looked as if the studios faced imminent federal censorship.

Under threat of government intervention and growing pressure from religious and women’s groups, studios were forced to tighten the reins by self-censorship. A regulatory body, Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA)⁴, was established in 1922, with William Hays, former postmaster general of the United States, at the helm of the organization.

The coming of sound in 1927 was a true knight in shining armor for the motion picture entertainment. Public interest in cinema had suffered a considerable decrease in the mid-1920s. Matti Paloheimo comments:

“In 1927, American film theaters received 60 000 000 cinemagoers weekly. Only two years later the corresponding figure was over 110 million. Film industry was one of the few businesses that survived the Wall Street Crash and the subsequent Great Depression. During the economic crisis, cinemagoers and the unemployed were almost identified with each other. Hollywood’s everlastingly industrializing production machinery offered stars, dreams and splendor to the desperate populace.”⁵

However, the introduction of talking pictures was also the downfall of cinema in America: there was a call for stricter censorship. Some filmmakers set bounds to their production to avoid government censorship, but others who had lived through the freedoms of Prohibition, found it difficult to assent to the Christian ideology of the MPPDA: “--sympathy of the audience should never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil or sin.”⁶ In consequence, the MPPDA assembled the Production Code (or Hays Code)⁷ in 1930 to govern film content. The Production Code was a document that outlined, in great detail, what could not be shown or said on silver screen. The Code as such had no efficient method of enforcement, though. Regulations were regularly circumvented by witty wordplays or ambiguous implications.

“As the Depression wore on, moviemakers slacked off on their adherence to the Code. Dozens of films produced in 1932 and 1933 presented women using their sexuality to get ahead. The “bad girl” movies, including *Red Headed Woman* starring Jean Harlow, were huge box office hits.”⁸

⁴ The name of the association was changed to Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) in 1946.

⁵ Matti Paloheimo, *Uskonto elokuvassa*. Hämeenlinna: Karisto, 1979, p. 37

⁶ The Motion Picture Production Code of 1930, General Principles: 1

⁷ An improvement of the Production Code (June 13, 1934) gave birth to the Production Code Administration (PCA) and required films released on or after July 1, 1934 to obtain a certificate of approval before being released. If a theater would run a film without the certificate of approval, it would be fined \$25,000.

⁸ David Espar, *Hollywood Censored: Movies, Morality & the Production Code*.

“The early 1930s constitutes an amazingly steamy period, epitomized in actress Mae West’s controversial lines that were filled with double entendres and sexual imagery: “I can make it happen when the shades go down,” she purred. And audiences knew exactly what she was referring to by “it.”⁹

In 1933, the Catholic Legion of Decency (CLOD) was founded in response to an address given by Cardinal Amleto Cicognani. Disappointed of the poor advance, Cicognani warned against the “massacre of innocence of youth” and urged a campaign for the “purification of the cinema”. The CLOD, which believed to speak for the moral values of the American public, was of great assistance to the MPPDA in the fight against films that “corrupt[ed] public morals and promot[ed] a sex mania”.¹⁰ The increasing popularity of the Catholic Church in the United States and the publication of *Vigilanti Cura* (the encyclical letter of Pope Pius XI on motion pictures) in 1936 further strengthened the position of the Catholic Legion of Decency and Joseph Breen, a moralist and newly appointed head of the Production Code Administration. The depiction of religious and ethnic groups and the depiction of sexual and criminal activity were carefully controlled, and always with usage of a most Catholic “filter”.

“The Production Code Administration and the Legion worked closely together and often combined forces to prevent studios from offending Catholic sensibilities, but the Legion always stood ready to condemn any film it believed immoral. -- The industry believed that the combination of negative publicity and Catholic boycott would make it impossible for any Legion-condemned film to make a profit. Rather than risk a loss of income or challenge the Legion’s authority to censor their product, producers bowed to the pressure and cut the offending material from all prints exhibited worldwide. In reality, then, the Legion’s view of sex and politics reached an international market.”¹¹

Hollywood’s hypocrisy, “the tradition of Victorian double standards of morality, was settled: cinema adopted its role as the guardian of public morals; it became a priest and a psychiatrist.”^{12 13}

The 1940s brought forward not only the Hollywood Antitrust Case (1948) – which marked the end of the studio system and the “Golden Age of Hollywood” – but also considerable political factors that were to mold American film. The Cold War brought about constant tension and rivalry between the United States and communist states (mainly Soviet Union and China). Senator Joseph McCarthy made himself the leader of this anti-communist paranoia, during which even liberal reforms, such as child labour laws or women’s suffrage were regarded as “Red plots”! As a result of the Republicans’ electoral victory in 1946, the power of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) reached exorbitant proportions. Its investigation into the Hollywood film industry a year later resulted in the Hollywood Blacklist, a record of motion picture entertainment professionals who were denied work due to their political beliefs or associations, whether they were factual or not.

⁹ <http://www.fathom.com/course/10701053/session2.html>

¹⁰ Extract from the Legion’s membership pledge by Archbishop John McNicholas (1933)

¹¹ *The Catholic Crusade Against the Movies, 1940-1975*, p. 5

¹² *Uskonto elokuvassa*, p. 37

¹³ It should be remembered, however, that many exploitation films – most notoriously Harry Revier’s *Child Bride* (1938), which showed twelve-year-old actress Shirley Mills nude – got around the directives of the Code, because they were produced outside the studio system.

Development

As foreign films were not bound by the Production Code and could cross the threshold of censorship with ease, the restrictions on American films lost their meaning. Code prohibitions began to vanish when even sanctions imposed by the Catholic Legion of Decency did not eliminate the possibility of a box office success and when directors, such as Otto Preminger, determinedly persisted with their assaults on the authorities. Especially two Swedish films – Arne Mattsson’s *One Summer of Happiness* (1951) and Ingmar Bergman’s *Summer with Monika* (1953) – liberated American cinema. “The situation had been completely absurd for a long time: children were born but sexual intercourse was an unknown concept, people were shot but blood could not trickle, swearwords did not exist even in the fiercest fits of rage.”¹⁴ Racial diversity was handled overtly and open-mindedly and sexual behaviour could finally be dealt with in a frank fashion. Or was this the case?

“The 1950s continued what the 40s had begun. As society changed its notions of what was acceptable in the field of sexual activity, so the Western allowed in themes and ideas which had previously been taboo. In 1959 came *Warlock*, which in its portrayal of the relationship between Henry Fonda and Anthony Quinn came closer than anything seen before to suggestions of homosexuality. Two years later, in *The Last Sunset*, the plot turns on the possibility of Kirk Douglas’ incest with his daughter.”¹⁵

Conversely, the influential societal position of the Catholic Church was still noticeable in Hollywood productions. “Churches rose from their ashes. World War II was followed by a broad religious and ecclesiastic renaissance. Churches became an important factor [...] in the spiritual and cultural reconstruction. -- In 1955, Interfilm (International Interchurch Film Centre) was founded.”¹⁶

Moreover, McCarthyism experienced a revival at the point of the Vietnam-related Red Scare. “Military life was idealized, the world of commerce was presented as a religion and communists got their old role as the worst of thieves.”¹⁷ The new Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) laid emphasis on its export storm, with the basis of systematic propaganda pursuant to the Cold War. In fear of unemployment and a second blacklist, numerous film artists became part of the propaganda machine in attempt to “improve” their image.

“Self-deception became general: we can carry on with democratic films later on ...”¹⁸ Many duplicitous pro-American Cold War films were produced, but “not one succeeded even economically”.¹⁹ Peter von Bagh speculates that filmmakers were troubled with a lack of faith, because they knew their films were made to order for studios keen on cooperation with authorities and to redeem upcoming opportunities. Studios were out to make money first and art second, and artists did all they could to avoid any (communist) accusations.

¹⁴ Peter von Bagh, *Elokuvan historia*. Keuruu: Otava, 2004, p. 473

¹⁵ Edward Buscombe, *The BFI Companion to the Western*. London: André Deutsch Ltd., 1988, p. 45 - 46

¹⁶ *Uskonto elokuvassa*, p. 37

¹⁷ *Elokuvan historia*, p. 328

¹⁸ Id

¹⁹ Id

Due to the mistrustful era, however, even the most middle-of-the-road filmmakers were not always spared from finger pointing. Alleged homosexuality was also a common cause for being targeted by McCarthyism. According to scholars, alleged homosexuality resulted in more persecutions than suspected connections with Communism. By the rules set by the MPAA, films could not depict explicitly homosexual characters. Edward Dmytryk, among other directors, bid defiance to the despotic MPAA by insubordinate films that gave a positive picture of homosexuality and treated the subject unambiguously. Nonetheless, homosexuality was generally implicitly suggested, through a character's mannerisms and behavior.

"In a hundred years of movies, homosexuality has only rarely been depicted on the screen. When it did appear, it was there as something to laugh at – or something to pity – or even something to fear. These were fleeting images, but they were unforgettable, and they left a lasting legacy. Hollywood, that great maker of myths, taught straight people what to think about gay people... and gay people what to think about themselves."²⁰

Homophobia and the idealization of capitalism brought about an incredibly inhumane image of a "good" (masculine) man. A masculine man was often depicted as one who found contentment in the hectic, material and ever less popular American culture, one who considered the family to be a matter of secondary importance. "Fittingly reduced to a logo of mass production and consumption, the fifties' standard of normative masculinity was an incoherent portrait of the typical American male."²¹ The 1956 motion picture *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* was a welcome protest against the Hollywood superman. "What seemed homogenous about American men in the fifties, at least according to the discourses about masculinity in widespread circulation then, was actually specific to the normative social position of some men within the culture, namely, the white, heterosexual, corporate, WASP, suburban breadwinner as personified by the ubiquitous figure of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, the logo of the age which still represents it four decades later."²² The protagonist Tom Rath (Gregory Peck) faces ethical problems as he tries to earn enough to support his wife and children. Rath decides to turn down a high-pressure travelling position in order to spend time with his family, unlike his boss (Fredric March), who ruins his marriage and family life by burning the candle at both ends. *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* was a daring film to be made during the Cold War era, because it also contains antiwar material: Tom, an ex-soldier, is often haunted by painful flashback memories. The outlook of *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* both commercially and militarily was truly groundbreaking during its time of release.

Spartacus, a 1960 film directed by Stanley Kubrick and written by the blacklisted Dalton Trumbo, is a controversial film. On one hand, it stands behind the ideals of Hollywood by portraying the leading man, Spartacus (Kirk Douglas), as a beefy American hero with an unbroken spirit and with all the vigor needed to crush a villain. On the other hand, some film historians feel that Spartacus is depicted as a communist who fights the early Roman

²⁰ Vito Russo

²¹ Steven Cohan, *Masked Men: Masculinity and the Movies in the Fifties*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997.

²² Id

Empire by liberating slaves. Furthermore, some scenes from *Spartacus* were cut due to their immorality. These include quite a few violent battle sequences, as well as a bath scene, in which the Roman patrician and general Crassus (Laurence Olivier) attempts to seduce his slave Antoninus (Tony Curtis) using the analogy of “eating oysters” and “eating snails” to express his opinion that sexual preference is a matter of taste rather than morality.

One searches in vain in 1950s Hollywood pictures for a new perception of women, which would assume their capacities and value. “The American cinema of the 1950’s presented women again as simpering, dependent hysterics or as undulating sexual manikins, epitomized by Marilyn Monroe.”²³ However, one exception is *Young Man With a Horn* (1950), one of the first Hollywood productions to present a married woman with implied lesbian tendencies, as suggested by Amy North’s (Lauren Bacall) unaccounted overnight absence from her husband and her intention to move to Europe with a female artist. Some film critics have suggested that *Young Man With a Horn* was released and shown to a wide audience because the Production Code Administration felt that the film demonstrated the “immorality” of lesbianism and warned “normal” women to return to their kitchens.

The glorification of capitalism was naturally tied in with competition with the greatest ideological challenger – communism. Communist analogies were implanted here and there, not least in Westerns. John Ford’s *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon*, which functions as a prologue of the 1950s, embeds in itself unscrupulous multi-layered propaganda. The representation of Civil War veterans uniting in the cavalry in a common war against the Native Americans implicitly summons Americans to unite against communism. “National unity for the great Cold War effort was a theme of growing insistence.”²⁴ It is no surprise that the cavalry is victorious when young Native American revolutionaries refuse to take heed of their chiefs’ commands (who correlate with Russian tsars).

On a more concrete level, *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* contains the quintessence of American virtue. Captain Nathan Brittles (John Wayne) is independent, intelligent and, last but not least, masculine. *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* is typical of the genre in its ideological biasness through the distortion of historical reality. An emblematic Western did not portray black cowboys, although prairies of the western states of America were not unknown to black cattle breeders.

“In 1950 came *Broken Arrow*, a landmark in the Western’s treatment of the Indian. *Broken Arrow* may now be seen as something less than the perfectly liberal movie it was once taken for. No one except the conventional villains out for money is held responsible for the Indians’ plight, and the Indian girl with whom the hero (James Stewart) falls in love has to die lest miscegenation became something he and we have to live with. But the film did open up a space in which the Indian might be something more than a faceless screaming savage.”²⁵

As Edward Buscombe writes, films of the 1950s may now be seen as “something less than the perfectly liberal movies they were once taken for”. Hollywood had virtually

²³ Joan Mellen, *Women and Their Sexuality in the New Film*, New York: Horizon Press, 1974, p. 24

²⁴ Gary Wills, *John Wayne’s America: The Politics of Celebrity*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997.

²⁵ *The BFI Companion to the Western*, p. 45 - 46

disposed of its self-regulatory body (and “unconventional” cinema was completely free of censorship) and it was possible to treat taboo subjects, but the crooked, imbalanced republican government had managed to make most moviemakers turn a blind eye to the social evils. “Social guidance”, offered by directors who had fallen prey to the post-war hysteria, became a popular film genre. Sid Davis’ *Boys Beware* (1961) is a homophobic short film targeted at teenage boys, urging them to avoid encounters with potential molesters. “What Jimmy didn’t know was that Ralph was sick – a sickness that was not visible like smallpox, but no less dangerous and contagious – a sickness of the mind. You see, Ralph was a homosexual: a person who demands an intimate relationship with members of their own sex.”²⁶ “One never knows when a homosexual is about. He may appear normal and it may be too late when you discover he is mentally ill.”²⁷ These pathetic lines demonstrate how American mainstream film still pushed forward its deep-rooted outlook and attempted to establish crystal-clear role models. A “way of life like sugar candy” was under construction.

Although filmmakers were forced to restrain themselves from direct handling of sensitive issues during the Cold War, some individuals of the film industry daringly opposed the government’s actions and the way in which Hollywood films mirrored its attitudes. Herbert Biberman directed *Salt of the Earth* in 1953 to scrutinize the American class conflict.

“The events take place in Silver City, where workers (of which most are Mexican) go on strike. *Salt of the Earth* concentrates on a battle fought for basic rights and integrates beautifully the private and the public: since the place of work is under revolution, the battleground has to extend to one’s own home. Women have to achieve absolute equality. *Salt of the Earth* was never put into proper circulation. Members of the team were arrested and battered during shootings, the trade union house was reduced to ashes and black people involved in the making of the film were treated unjustly (it was unheard-of that a director’s assistant could be black). A certain congress member of California blamed the film for being the “new weapon of the Soviet Union”.”²⁸

“Racial balance -- changed markedly by the end of the 60s. Besides more frequent and more dignified Mexican characters, there were, if only occasionally, substantial roles for black actors, as in *The Scalphunters* (1967), in which Ossie Davis took his opportunity well. With *Cheyenne Autumn* John Ford had made a serious, if still compromised, attempt to set the record straight about how the Indians had been treated. Since there was no such thing as Native American film industry it was inevitable that Indians would still be seen through white eyes, but the ‘me heapum big chief’ stereotype had become unusable. Women, on the other hand, another disadvantaged group in the traditional Western, did not find their role much improved. -- Hollywood could not in its heart believe in women taking up arms; especially in a genre which was, however notionally, set in the age of crinoline.”²⁹

The Hollywood film presented scientific knowledge, but also biased information, and often misrepresented women and gay, black and working class people. In the late 1960s, white capitalist men gradually gave way to people of other colour or religion. Also, in the middle of the sixties, a new wave of feminism swept across the United States. Feminists greatly improved the position of women on screen, and vice versa: the world shattering representations of women in some out-of-character films disillusioned the western world

²⁶ Sid Davis, *Boys Beware*, 1961

²⁷ *Boys Beware*

²⁸ *Elokuvan historia*, p. 329

²⁹ *The BFI Companion to the Western*, p. 51

to see women as more than people responsible for the three K's: Kinder, Küche, Kirche ("children, kitchen, church"). Women were permitted to be tough and career-oriented (Karriere).

Not until 1968 did the authorities and the film industry reach a consensus on censorship. A classification system, which categorizes films with regard to suitability in terms of sex, violence and profanity, was established. Certification was to be done by industry bodies, not the government. Thus far, however, the government has not released its hold of Hollywood. "Films are usually not banned today in the United States, as the First Amendment's section on freedom of speech is strictly enforced."³⁰ To some extent, it is fair to say that freedom of speech is absolute and that film artists are liberated from all interference, both political and clerical, but a film can be censored or even banned "if there are legal or civil violations, or if the film is a threat to national security"³¹.

Since its rise in the 1910s, Hollywood has had a great impact on the worldwide community. Eric Johnston, president of the MPAA (1945 – 1951) has said: "It is no exaggeration to say that the modern motion picture industry sets the styles for half the world. There is not one of us who isn't aware that the motion picture industry is the most powerful medium for the influencing of people that man has ever built. -- We can set new styles of living and the doctrine of production must be made completely popular."³² And so was done: by controlling the depiction of ethnic and religious groups, sexual and criminal activity, and other repellent subjects, the Motion Picture Association of America set its style of living. It was adhered by all Hollywood studios and makers of films. Some adhered on a voluntary basis to partake in the creation of the American myth; some became cogs in the wheel of society reluctantly and under pressure of political and religious groups. Others spoke out and found their brainchild in the hands of the censor.

³⁰ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Banned_films#United_States

³¹ Id

³² Eric Johnston, *America Unlimited*, 1944, from Lary May, *The Big Tomorrow: Hollywood and the Politics of the American Way*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000, p. 176

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