

THE HISTORY OF CENSORSHIP IN THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY

By Nick Mertens

Earliest Films to be banned



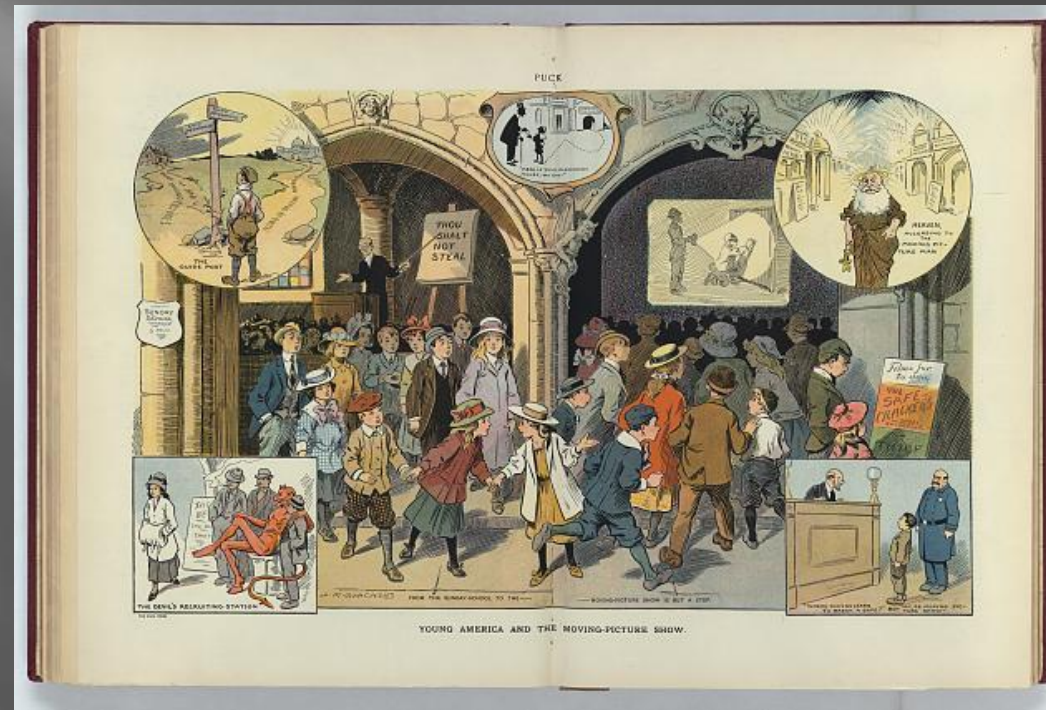
- ▣ Dorlita in the Pleasure dance - 1894 – Banned in New Jersey seen as an illegal burlesque show.
- ▣ Reenactment of the Massacre at Wounded Knee -1906- First Film banned nation wide, and was confiscated by he Government who thought the film was too sympathetic towards the American Indians and was in bad taste to show an event that led to the death of 31 Americans. This film was also produced by Buffalo Bill
- ▣ <=Buffalo Bill

Early Government intervention

- ▣ Politicians were eager to get a handle on the budding industry of film but were unable to cut through legal defense of the film industry.
- ▣ Senator Hoke Smith tried on several different occasions to get a federal censorship board established. Smith was met with party line blocking each time he proposed a bill by Republicans.
- ▣ He was fearful of what cinema could do to children who saw it.

Victorian Era decency movement

- Through out the turn of the Century there was an over zealous movement of decency, fearful that Children were overly influenced by what they saw on the screen and would try to replicate it



Decency leagues and censorship boards

- ▣ States and different Municipalities set up different Film commissions to watch over cinema and ban films or omit sections they deemed not suitable for viewing.
- ▣ In Chicago the Board of censorship was made up of different religious group members and the Police Commissioner.
- ▣ The Chicago Board was very typical for the Censorship boards in States and Cities throughout the Country.

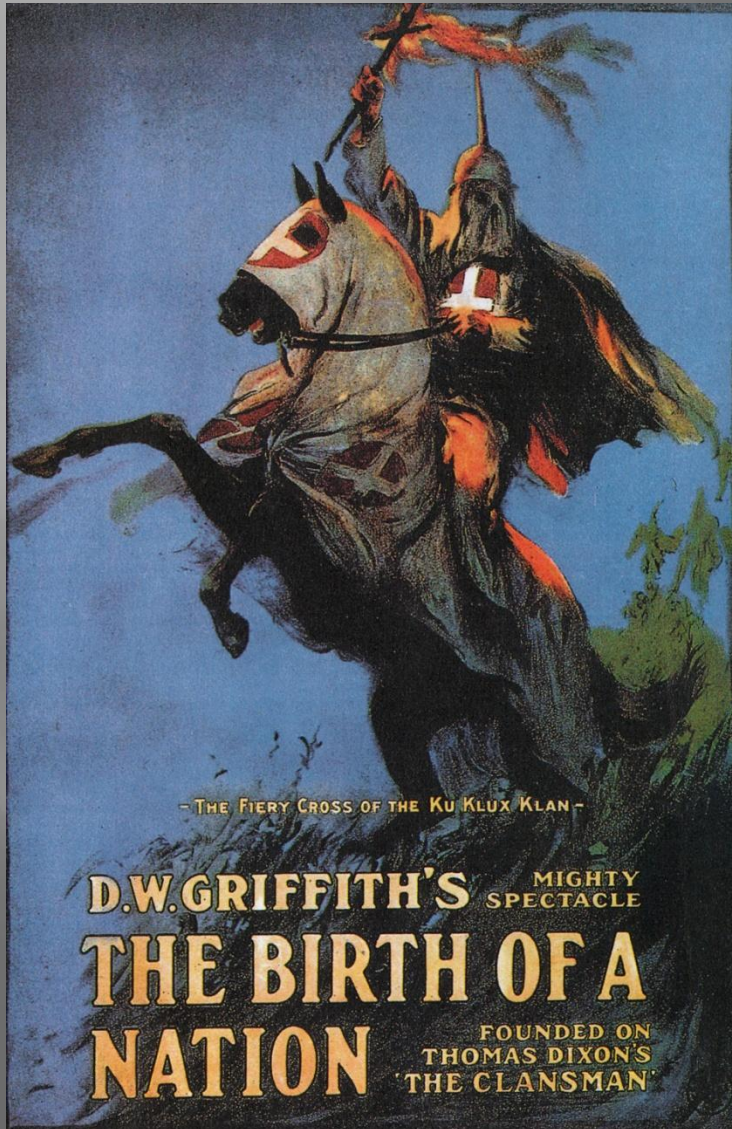
The National Board of Censorship

- ▣ Founded in 1909 by leading film making companies and theaters in New York
- ▣ Response to Mayor McClellan closing Nickelodeons
- ▣ The National Board of Censorship created a board of Censorship of Motion Picture Shows to view films and recommend cuts and sometime ban films.

1915 Supreme Court Case

- ▣ *Mutual Film Corporation v. Industrial Commission of Ohio*
- ▣ The outcome of the case was in fact that Film content did not fall under Freedom of Speech
- ▣ The court issued this statement “...the exhibition of moving pictures is a business, pure and simple, originated and conducted for profit ... not to be regarded, nor intended to be regarded by the Ohio Constitution.”
- ▣ In other words states and cities had the right to continue on policing and censoring cinema in whatever way they saw fit.

Birth of a Nation (1915)



- ❑ Banned in Cities and States Through out the Country
- ❑ Led to rioting in some cities
- ❑ Held the Box office Record for almost 2 decades
- ❑ Further intensified the Government' s Eye on Cinema

Hays

- ▣ To try and keep the Government at Bay the Film Industry came together and found a figure head to create the illusion of self censorship.
- ▣ William Hays was that Man, he was a Presbyterian minister, former post master general under Warren G. Harding and more importantly he had plenty of friends in Washington.
- ▣ So Hays was appointed President of the newly founded Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) later MPAA



Before The Code

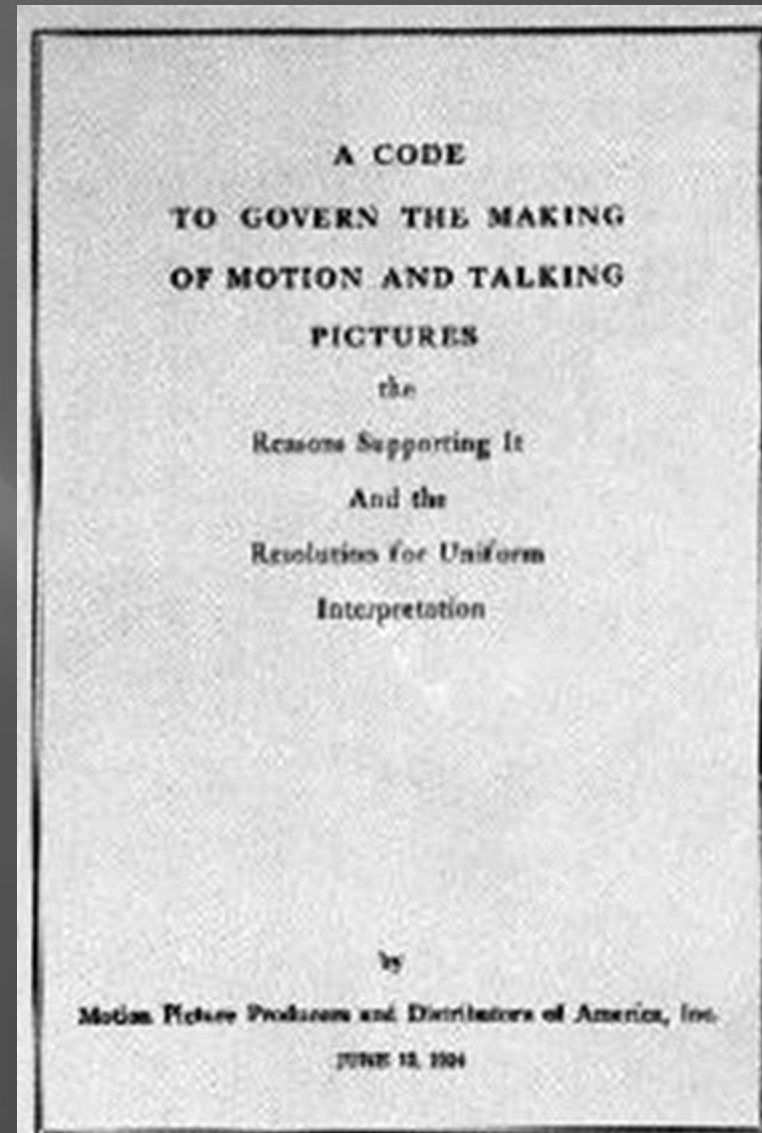
- ▣ Hays did his best to keep the Federal Government out of Hollywood, speaking to congress on several occasions, but in 1929 Washington was on the verge of intervention and censorship of the film industry on a national scale.
- ▣ Hays had earlier crafted a list of guidelines and suggestions for film makers. This list was called the "Don't's and Be Carefuls." – These suggestions helped steer around most censorship boards around the country but after several films were released considered risqué by several members of Congress Hays had to act fast to avoid a full scale intervention by Congress.

The Production Code

- ▣ Hays turned to two men to create the Code.
- ▣ Martin Quigley was the Catholic editor of the Motion Picture Herald .
- ▣ And Daniel A. Lord was a Jesuit Priest.
- ▣ The Two crafted a code that after some revisions from several studio Heads was readied and made public and standard practice of the MPPDA on March 31 1930

The Code Itself

- ▣ The Code was split into two sections.
 - General Principles- which was made up of mostly rules concerning morality. Like evil must always be punished.
 - Particular Applications – which was a specific list of things that could not be depicted at all.
 - The list also shows concern for making a rating system that would call for adults only in certain films because this was thought to easily broken and kids would be able to sneak in.
 - The code was heavily influenced by Catholic theology and standards, that both the men were fluent in.

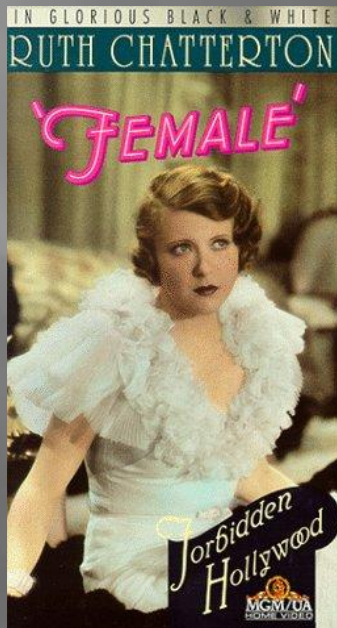


Pre Code Era

- ▣ The code was met with great approval by both the Government and Hollywood.
- ▣ The Government now believed that Hollywood had create a system that would suffice as a way to appease the masses who called for reform and intervention.
- ▣ Hollywood was pleased to have the code because it would get the government off its back but also because the MPPDA had no way of enforcing the Code.

Pre Code Era

- ❑ The Code was written and published but there was no way of enforcing it.
- ❑ And with the Great Depression now in full swing Hollywood had to create risqué and more adventures films to get people to pay for a movie ticket.
- ❑ For these reasons from 1930-1934 is referred to as the Pre Code Era because the Production code was published and public but the MPPDA had no way of enforcing it.
- ❑ This led to films like Scarface (1932) and Female (1933) which used aggressive violence and undressing women, respectfully.



1934 A change

- ❑ In 1934 after much public outcry the MPPDA knew a change had to be made.
- ❑ The Production Code Administration (PCA) was reluctantly created under the umbrella of the MPPDA and Joseph Breen was the head of the PCA.
- ❑ Unlike Hays, Breen took his job very seriously and thought it was his moral duty to police Hollywood.
- ❑ Breen followed the Production code to the letter and with the PCA he had the authority to edit or completely stop films from going to theaters because studios had to send their films to the PCA before they could be released to the public.



Enforcement of the Production code



- ❑ The code was now sharply enforced under Breen and many movies were edited to comply with the Code.
- ❑ There are many movies that get around the code by using clues and suggestions as opposed to outright saying or showing things.
- ❑ For example in Stagecoach (1939) one of the main character is a prostitute but this is never state it is hinted at through what other characters say and how she is judged by them.