

Do Movies Reflect our Culture or does our Culture

Create our Movies?

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At the height of the Roaring Twenties, with the advent of Women's rights and relaxing of many of the societal taboos there arose a sensation by the name of Mae West. Always one to push the envelope, this Brooklyn born phenom wrote and produced a play in 1926 simply entitled, SEX, in which she also played the leading role. This led to her arrest and conviction on morals charges. The publicity catapulted her to Broadway success and led to Hollywood where she, under contract with Paramount pictures, appeared in a series of movies. She became the number one box office hit, tested the censorship system that existed at that time but in the meantime saved Paramount pictures from bankruptcy. She is also remembered for the double entendre, of which she was a master. Here are listed just a few--- I used to be Snow White but I drifted. -- -When I'm good I'm very very good, but when I'm bad I'm better--- You only live once, but if you do it right, once is enough--- Between two evils, I always pick the one I never tried before.---I generally avoid temptation unless I can't resist it---Its not the men in my life that count, it's the life in my men---I only like two kinds of men, domestic and imported.

Needless to say she was ahead of her time and, as a result, strict rules of censorship resulted. The Motion Picture Association of America, founded in 1922, was led by Will Hays who was the architect of the Production code in 1930, otherwise known as the Hays Code. This established strict standards

for control over the content of Hollywood films. In addition, religious organizations such the National Catholic Office for Motion Pictures and the Episcopal Committee for Motion Pictures as well as local censorship boards with variable standards based in cities and states and generally overseen by the local police departments had their own system of oversight.. What was the Production Code and what did it consist of?

Will Hays, born in Sullivan, Indiana, served as the Republican National Committee Chair, manager of Warren G Harding's Presidential campaign, followed by Postmaster General under Harding. The Hays Code consisted of a series of General Principles, all, in my opinion, somewhat vague, which in turn, subjected them to broad interpretation. They were, as follows:

1. No picture shall be produced that will lower the moral standards of those who see it.
2. Correct standards of life, subject only to the requirements of drama and entertainment, shall be presented.
3. Law, natural or human, shall not be ridiculed, nor shall sympathy be created for its violation. These principles were applied regarding crimes against the law, sex, vulgarity, obscenity, profanity, nudity, dancing, religion, locations (ie bedrooms), national feelings (respect for the flag),and repellent subjects. There then followed an extensive listing of statements supporting the aforementioned principles and applications.

A recent edition of the New York Times Sunday magazine, the

Great Performers issue, featured an article entitled A Brief History of Kissing in the Movies by A. O. Scott. In the article, Scott discusses how the kiss, in view of formal and informal censorship during the early film era, became a substitute for something else i.e. all the sex you could show on screen. The Production code insured that displays of “excessive or lustful kissing” were discouraged if not banned. In a sense, the kiss, however delivered on screen, was an implied “ gateway drug” for naughtier pleasures. As time evolved, the depiction of the kiss has evolved as well. Who can forget Clark Gable and Vivian Leigh embracing and kissing in Gone with the Wind – the rest is implied. Fast forward to Sidney Poitier and Katherine Houghton , an early interracial kiss, in Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner in 1967. More recently , Jack and Ennis in Brokeback Mountain. The old taboos have been shattered, evolving as has society and our culture in general.

While here in the United States we were obsessing over how lengthy or suggestive a kiss was in the 1930’s, across the pond, in Germany, the rumblings of another great war were in their infancy. Under the supervision of Joseph Goebbels, the ruling National Socialist party, the Nazi”s, undertook a massive propaganda campaign for its citizens and the world promoting German supremacy. At the heart of the endeavor was a

horror and enthrallment. That experience convinced him that he needed to enlist. He also came to the realization that "all film was propaganda". Capra, a native of Sicily, was driven by an immigrants desire to do right by his adopted country.

Just as FDR had come to understand the power of short films and news reels to sell the New Deal in the 1930's, General George Marshall saw the need to instill a crusading faith in both the general populace as well as enlistees in the need to respond when called upon to fight. He believed that movies were the most effective way to achieve that faith. By the end of 1943 over 300 movies released by Hollywood contained spirit building messages that were crafted and approved by Washington.

In June of 1940, the fall of France shocked the nation as the movie going public, very familiar with the Paris of romance and sophistication, saw that Paris was now under the control of the Nazis, as presented in the news reels of Parisians weeping while the Wehrmacht marched through the streets. Over the next six weeks Churchill succeeded Chamberlain as Prime Minister of Great Britain, the Dunkirk evacuation took place, and Churchill's thunderous "We shall fight on the beaches....we shall never surrender" speech to the House of Commons took place, all presented to the movie going public.

In the meantime, with the tacit approval of Roosevelt, the Motion Picture Committee Cooperating for Defense was formed with the commitment to making films to support any future war effort. All effort in that vein were still

covert due to the persistent isolationist mentality of many Americans. With the backing of General George Marshall, Frank Capra embarked on a series of movies entitled, *Why We Fight*, generally considered the single most important filmed propaganda of the war. Other than Capra, who remained in Washington, the other four were, at various times, witnesses to live battle action, including the Battle of Midway, North Africa, invasion of Italy, B17 sorties over Germany, as well as accompanying the D Day invasion force, Operation Overlord, and on to Paris, all captured on film. Hollywood being Hollywood, some of the footage consisted of reenactments due to the danger involved, but the movie going audience was convinced nonetheless.

The culmination of the effort was the liberation of Dachau, the first concentration camp founded in 1934, captured on film by George Stevens and his crew. They all were deeply affected by the horrors they witnessed out of which came two feature length documentaries for the Nuremberg trials entitled *Dachau and the other Camps* and *The Nazi Plan*, both of which sealed the convictions of the Nazi officials on trial.

They all felt they had participated in the major experience of their time which, in turn, would have a positive effect on their work. Their focus was turned more towards reflecting the world in which they lived, focusing on the truth, more in line with those films coming from Europe and Great Britain: David Lean, Roberto Rossellini and others who had lived through the war and were closer to the goings on in the world.

This new attitude was reflected in William Wyler's movie, *The Best Years of Our Lives*. Obsessed with realism, Wyler displayed the lives of three protagonists, three veterans, all from different backgrounds, struggling with the after effects of the war, alcoholism, emotional issues, and marital discord. The concluding scene culminated in a realization through resignation and hope, that the men of WW II were no longer defined by their military service but that they; alone had to write their own future, to apply the same courage and strength of character that they and twelve million others applied to win the war.

The movie dominated the awards at the Oscars. It swept across the country, packing the theatres as it became essential viewing and an occasion for an extended national examination of America's obligations to the men who had served in WWII.

For the others, Stevens, Huston, and Ford, the war had strengthened their resolve to let nothing compromise their work. This social realism, dramas about alcoholism, mental illness, anti-Semitism, would also inspire others, Billy Wilder and Elia Kazan among them. Also, as private citizens, in the late 1940's, they became active in the industry's central political cause of the postwar years, the fight against the resurgent House Un-American Activities Committee and they united in public opposition to the blacklisting of suspected Communists that had begun in Hollywood. Soon after sweeping the Academy awards, Wyler gave a nationally broadcast radio address in which he said that in the current climate of paranoia and distrust, decent

people were becoming afraid to express their opinions. They were creating fear in Hollywood. Fear would result in censorship. In the end, the public would be deprived of entertainment that would stimulate, resulting in a diet of pictures that conform to some peoples arbitrary standards of Americanism. Both Wyler and Huston joined forces to spearhead Hollywood's Committee for the First Amendment, a group that lobbied for free expression and an end to red baiting.

In 1946, John Huston produced a movie for the Army entitled *Let There Be Light* about soldiers with "neuropsychiatric disorders" , what we now refer to as PTSD. This effort encompassed three months and seventy hours of footage. He characterized the men as being "casualties of the spirit" "born and bred in peace, educated to hate war, they were overnight plunged into sudden and terrible situations" "living in a dead man's world". Once delivered, the Army banned the movie, reasons for which were not stated. In spite of positive reviews, James Agee among them and extensive lobbying by Huston and others their efforts failed. In the end Huston stated the Army "wanted to maintain the warrior myth" which said that "our warriors went to war and came back all the stronger for the experience, standing tall and proud" , "only a few weaklings fell by the wayside." "Everyone was a hero and had medals and ribbons to prove it". The Army banned the movie for 35 years.

The Production Code, a constant thorn in the side of Hollywood's Producers and Directors resulted in the continuation of Hollywood churning

beholden to the restrictions of the Production code. Local theatres, in order to meet the demand, became increasingly willing to play these movies that disregarded the Code. In that climate, a major sea change in Hollywood was taking place. In 1966, *Who's afraid of Virginia Wolfe* was released with a For Adults Only label, testing the Code face on. In December 1966, the Code experienced a direct assault when MGM released Antonioni's *Blow Up*, in strict defiance of the Code.

This change in the Hollywood scene is beautifully described in the book *Pictures at a Revolution* also by Mark Harris. On July 4, 1965, Jane Fonda and her soon to be husband, Roger Vadim, held a party at their rental beachfront home in Malibu. Old Hollywood was well represented in the personage of Jane's father Henry, William Wyler, Gene Kelly, Daryl Zanuck, and Lauren Bacall. New Hollywood, soon to be discovered consisted of Warren Beatty, Tuesday Weld, Jean Seberg, Dennis Hopper, and Jane's brother , Peter. Andy Warhol happened to show up, as well as Jack Nicholson, Buck Henry, and Mike Nichols among others. Jane Fonda was the perfect host as she bridged the gap between old and new Hollywood as represented by her father and brother Peter. She had not yet played a visible role in political activism which was soon to follow. Peter arranged for the Byrds folk rock group to play which enamoured at least some of the crowd. Their hit song, *Dylan's Mr Tamborine Man*, reached the #1 spot on the billboard chart the week before. Of note is that Dylan would go electric later that month at the Newport Folk Festival. The generation gap, a term just coming into vogue, was well

displayed when Henry Fonda approached his happily stoned son Peter yelling "Can't you get them to turn it down". Daryl Zanuck and Georg Cukor stared dumbstruck as a barefoot young hippie began to nurse her baby in front of them. On the fringe stood Mike Nichols, observing the goings on, tribal rituals, lapses of etiquette, deferences and courtesies in this hothouse of West Coast privilege and filed them away for future use. Roger Vadim later wrote that reflecting back on that night it looked like a movie but not a Hollywood film. More like something by Fellini or Antonioni, unresolved and inchoate, that would leave everyone walking out of the theatre talking and wandering what would happen next?

Sidney Poitier was also in attendance, a part of neither old or new Hollywood, but a category unto himself. In the Heat of the Night and Guess who's Coming to Dinner were still in the early developmental stages at that time—two movies that would make him the biggest box office star of 1968. As preparations for In the Heat of the Night reached the point of determining the location for filming, the south was the natural setting. The previous summer Poitier and Harry Belafonte, while visiting Mississippi, had been tailed by members of the Klan. The mixed race cast of Otto Preminger's Hurry Sundown had received death threats and harassment while filming in Louisiana. Poitier's ex-wife had held a fundraising reception for him at the home they formerly shared in Pleasantville, New York. A cross was burned on their front yard. As Norman Jewison, the director, was quoted, " Sidney

did not want to go below the Mason-Dixon line. There's no goddam way he'd do it" They settled for Sparta, Illinois.

Guess who's coming to Dinner, as you might recall, featured an affluent white couple, proud liberals in late middle age, who would have their political and personal principles put to the test when their daughter walked through the door with a black fiancé. Stanly Kramer, the director, received death threats and harassing phone calls. The movie got an unexpected boost from some front page news. In September 1967, eighteen year old Margaret Rusk married twenty year old Guy Smith at Stanford University. Rusk was white and Smith was black. Rusk's father, Dean Rusk, was Secretary of State under Lyndon Johnson. Their wedding made the cover of Time magazine. Also, Spenser Tracy and Katherine Hepburn came out of retirement after many years to play the role of the parents. It proved to be Tracy's last role as he passed away soon after completion of the movie. On the day that Tracy was buried a landmark Supreme Court decision was handed down. Loving vs Virginia ruled that laws forbidding racial inter-marriage in sixteen states were deemed unconstitutional. These events brought the issue of interracial marriage to forefront with a proliferation of articles and editorials. The movie was an immediate blockbuster, the highest grossing movie that Kramer, Hepburn, Tracy, or Poitier had ever made and the biggest success in the history of Columbia Pictures.

In the mid sixties there were two kinds of actors working in the New York theatre: the type that Hollywood casting directors thought were handsome

enough for movies and the type that weren't. Dustin Hoffman was in the third category. He was the type who couldn't get work at all. He worked as a waiter, toy demonstrator at Macy's, an attendant at the New York Psychiatric Institute and the only male typist in the steno pool at the Manpower temp agency. When money got tight he was known to sleep on Gene Hackman's floor. He scraped along gaining occasional bit parts in the N Y theatre.

Mike Nichols, being an immigrant, had an outsiders view of American society, the deferences and courtesies, the tribal rituals and the obvious generational changes that were taking place. These observances segued into his current project at the time, directing *The Graduate* based on a novel by Charles Webb. He saw in Dustin Hoffman the leading man who would effectively fill the role of how he perceived Benjamin Braddock as a counter cultural protagonist. We all know the plot of the movie but what was it trying to say? The movie reviewers certainly had their say. Bosley Crowther of the *New York Times*, their long time reviewer, stated "a film that is not only one of the best of the year, but also one of the best sociocomic social satires we have had from Hollywood". He went on to say that "the overall picture has the quality of a very extensive and revealing social scam". Archer Winsten of the *New York Post* stated "whether taken as entertainment or as a social statement, it demonstrates a youth movement that can be cheered or jeered, enjoyed or criticized. The point is that Nichols has come through with something new under the movies sun". But what? The National Catholic office for Motion Pictures stated "the bedroom scene where Ben tries to talk

with his mistress is perhaps the best statement on film about how joyless an affair can be” Younger viewers did not agree.

25 year old Roger Ebert, just named the top reviewer of the Chicago Sun Times, saw Benjamin as a hapless hero lost in a “ferociously stupid upper middle class California suburb” “The funniest American comedy of the year....because it has a point of view. That is to say it is against something” . What many of the naysayers felt was that the movie was against them, their standards, their notion of what a well made picture should be, their ability to control a cultural conversation that they felt was slipping out of their grasp. Hollis Alpert wrote in the Saturday Review that when older audiences viewed The Graduate “it was almost like they were personally attacked” Richard Schickel of Life magazine fretted that the movie might be the latest symptom of the” battle cry’, “never trust anyone over thirty”. David Brinkly, writing in Ladies Home Journal called the movie “frantic nonsense” which led to a heated argument with his college age son and his friends who “thought The Graduate was absolutely the best movie they ever saw”. They liked it because it said about the parents and others what they would have said about us if they had made the movie—that we were “ self centered and materialistic, that we are licentious and deeply hypocritical about it, that we try to make them into walking advertisements for our own affluence”.

College kids filled the theatres. A report at the end of 1968 revealed that 48 percent of all movie tickets were sold to filmgoers under the age of 24. The longstanding Hollywood business model had been shattered. Development

and marketing tactics were now directed towards younger audiences and hiring younger filmmakers. Think George Lucas who was hired out of the Southern California graduate film program at the age of 23 to work for Warner Brothers as an assistant director.

Dustin Hoffman? This relative unknown became a rock star in the eyes of the youth. One day he was walking down Fifth Avenue with his fiancé, Anne, and they passed a beautiful young woman. She recognized Hoffman, looked through Anne, smiled at him, and lifted up her shirt. She wasn't wearing a bra. "sign me" she said. Reviewers were still skeptical. He was referred as "Mr Acne" and "Peter Schlemiel". They made fun of his height and the size of his nose. His success radically changed the perception of who a leading man was.

And then there was Bonnie and Clyde. Robert Benton and David Newman, art director and staff writer respectively for Esquire magazine, were cinephiles to the extreme and by that I don't mean Hollywood products. They were obsessed with the films they saw coming from Europe---- Truffaut, Fellini, Antonioni, Goddard, Bergman. Although they had never written or been involved in a screenplay, they were obsessed with the desire to write an American New Wave movie. Benson had been raised in a small East Texas town and was familiar with the exploits and death of Clyde Barrow and Bonnie Parker. They decided that the adventures of Bonnie and Clyde would make a great movie, bringing the French New Wave to Hollywood, a "gangster film" unlike any gangster film before it. At the

upheaval in the same way that music represented in that era. The two movies were viewed jointly as an indictment of the status quo, where *The Graduate* presented alienation and disaffection as a legitimate response to the false values of society as resoundingly as *Bonnie and Clyde* proscribed insurrection.

In the end the vastly outdated Production Code met its demise. Time and culture had passed it by. Jack Valenti, formerly a special assistant to LBJ, assumed the role as head of the Motion Picture Association of America in 1966. In addition to serving as the movie industry's lobbying arm in Washington, it also oversaw the failing Production Code. In 1968 Valenti decided to abandon the Production Code. Later that year he instituted the movie rating system that persists to this day with some revisions.

In the final scene of *Casablanca*, Humphrey Bogart states those immortal words to Ingrid Bergman, "We'll always have Paris". What did happen in Paris? We can only imagine. With the graphic nature of many of today's movies one wonders if some things shouldn't be left to the imagination. Do movies reflect our Culture or does our Culture create our movies? Yes!

She Always Knew How (2009) --- Charlotte Chandler

Pictures At a Revolution (2008) --- Mark Harris

Five Came Back (2014) --- Mark Harris

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W S J

French New Wave -- Wikipedia

The Motion Picture Code of 1930 -- Arts Reformation code . com

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series of films directed by Leni Riefenstahl. Victory of Faith was an hour long propaganda film about the fifth Nazi Party rally at Nuremberg in 1933. There followed the epic propaganda film of the sixth Nuremberg rally in 1934, Triumph of the Will for which she received international recognition. Of note is the fact that the ominous Nuremberg Laws evolved from these rallies, foretelling the fate of millions of Jews.

Hollywood continued to flourish in the 1930's. It has been said that in the latter part of that decade and into the 1940's over half of the U. S population attended at least one movie a week, a heady time for the studios.

In the book, Five Came Back by Mark Harris, five of the top movie directors of their time, John Ford, William Wyler, Frank Capra, John Huston, and George Stevens, for various reasons, enlisted in the armed forces as the United States became embroiled in World War II. Ford, due to sense of duty, oversaw the creation of the Naval Volunteer Photographic Unit, believing that it was essential to record the war as it happened. Following Pearl Harbor, Wyler and Huston joined the Army Signal Corp. Wyler, a Jewish immigrant, had witnessed U. S. troops liberating his hometown in Alsace at the end of World War I and also had relatives trapped in his hometown. Huston was looking for adventure as well as reinventing himself as a man of action. Stevens, the previous winter, had watched Leni Riefenstahl's documentary tribute to Aryan invincibility, Triumph of the Will, with both

out Westerns, prudish sex comedies and overblown historical epics and the monetary gravy train continued into the sixties. In the meantime, the world was changing. Sputnik, the Cuban missile crisis, Kennedy assassination, Civil Rights movement, Vietnam and its associated protests. The world was changing and the movie going public wanted more. The New Wave, a loose group of French filmmakers of the 50's and 60's, were iconoclasts, influenced by the social and economic troubles of post war France, rejecting the concept of producing literary period pieces written by novelists. They desired to shoot more current social issues on location and experiment with the film form, an example of European art cinema. The combination of objective realism, subjective realism and authorial commentary created a narrative ambiguity in the sense that questions that arise in a film are not answered in the end. The films were based on the auteur theory in that the director is the "author" of his movies with a personal signature from film to film. Early successful adapters of this style include Truffaut with *The 400 Blows* in 1959 and Goddard with *Breathless* in 1960, bringing critical acclaim and monetary rewards.

Among the young, smart city dwellers of New York City in the early 60's, a passion for European films, especially French New Wave was developing in theatres throughout the city—the New Yorker at Broadway and 88th street, East Village on Avenue B, as well as Bleecker Street.

This influx of European films had a distinct advantage. In view of the fact that they were not produced by the Hollywood studios, they were not

opening at the Montreal Film Festival the movie was a success. However the critics panned it relentlessly. Most prominent of all was the long time film critic of the NY times, Bosley Crowther. Joseph Morgenstern of Newsweek joined the fray until he viewed the movie with wife who loved it. Unable to withdraw his initial review, he wrote a follow up that retracted his earlier piece. He described its “dazzling artistry” and its “power to both enthrall and appall”. The tide was turned when Crowther became the target of very personal and public counter attacks calling him “blinded” and “insensitive”. In the end, Crowther lost his job at the NY Times as the chief critic after 26 years as a result of his misplaced virulent diatribes against the movie. Meanwhile, the fashion and style in Bonnie and Clyde became all the rage, featured in the November NY Times Style section as well as Faye Dunaway’s appearance in a multitude of the fashionable magazines—Harper’s Bazaar, Town and Country, Vogue, Life, Cosmopolitan, and Esquire resulting in a resurgence of interest in 1930 fashion. Time magazine featured Bonnie and Clyde on it’s cover, as the New Cinema: Violence, Sex and Art. It was said to be the sleeper of the decade but the best of the year...a watershed picture, the kind that signals a new style, a new trend.

It marked the public birth of a New Hollywood whereby the rest of the movie business was considered an archaic and doomed enterprise. In the end Bonnie and Clyde and The Graduate were felt to represent a joint statement, a companion piece on what the future of American movies could and should be. To the young moviegoers, these films reflected social