Bio of the Production Code

The **Production Code** (also known as the **Hays Code**) was a set of guidelines governing the production of motion pictures. The Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA, originally called the Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors Association) adopted the code in 1930, began effectively enforcing it in 1934, and abandoned it in 1967. The Production Code spelled out what was and was not considered morally acceptable in the production of American motion pictures.

Enforcement

As adopted in 1930, the code had no effective method of enforcement. A mechanism for enforcement was created in 1934. For the following twenty years or so, virtually all motion pictures produced in the United States adhered to the code. (The period between 1930 and 1934 is often called the 'pre-code' era because, even though the code existed, studios mostly ignored it.)

Adherence to the code was always mostly voluntary. In the mid-1950s, a few major producers began to openly challenge the code. By the mid-1960s, code enforcement had become virtually impossible. The code was abandoned in 1967 and replaced, in 1968, with the MPAA film rating system.

The Production Code was not government censorship. In fact, the Hollywood studios adopted the code in large part in the hopes of avoiding government censorship. They preferred self-regulation to government regulation.

Before the Production Code

Before the adoption of the Production Code, many perceived motion pictures as being immoral and thought they promoted vice and glorified violence. Numerous local censorship boards had been established, and approximately 100 cities across the country had local censorship laws. Motion picture producers feared that the federal government might step in.

In the early 1920s, three major scandals had rocked Hollywood: the manslaughter trials of comedy star Roscoe 'Fatty' Arbuckle (who was charged with being responsible for the death of actress Virginia Rappe at a wild party), the murder of director William Desmond Taylor (and the shocking revelations regarding his lifestyle), and the drug-related death of popular actor Wallace Reid. These stories, which happened almost simultaneously, were sensationalized in the press, and grabbed headlines across the country. They seemed to confirm a perception that many had of Hollywood—that it was "Sin City".

Public outcry over perceived immorality, both in Hollywood and in the movies, led to the creation, in 1922, of the Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors Association (which later became the Motion Picture Association of America).

Intended to project a positive image of the movie industry, the association was headed by Will H. Hays, who had previously been the campaign manager for President Warren G. Harding. Hays pledged to impose a set of moral standards on the movies. Although his name is often associated with censorship by some film historians, Hays was fairly mild-mannered and easily persuaded and manipulated.

Hays spent eight years attempting to enforce a moral authority over Hollywood films, with little effect. The Hays office did issue a list of "Don'ts" and "Be Carefuls" in 1927, but film-makers continued to do pretty much what they wanted.

1930 to 1934

With the advent of talking pictures, it was felt that a more formal written code was needed. The Production Code was written, and adopted on March 31, 1930.

Ironically, after the code was adopted, the movies got racier and more violent than they had been. It was the time of the Great Depression, and some film-makers wanted desperately to make films that made money—and what made money was sex and violence. And there was no way to enforce the Production Code.

Public outcry over perceived immorality in motion pictures reached a peak, even as movie-going audiences reached some of the highest numbers in history.

1934 changes to the Code

The Motion Picture Association of America responded to criticism of the racy and violent films of the early 1930s by strengthening the code. An amendment to the code, adopted on June 13, 1934, established the **Production Code Administration**, and required all films to obtain a certificate of approval before being released. Joseph Breen was appointed head of the new Production Code Administration.

Under Breen's leadership, enforcement of the Production Code became rigid and notorious. Breen's conservative views angered some of the Hollywood moguls. The first major instance of censorship under the Production Code involved the 1934 film *Tarzan and his Mate* , in which brief nude scenes involving actress Maureen O'Sullivan (actually, a body double was used) were edited out of the master print of the film. Another famous case of enforcement involved the 1943 western *The Outlaw* , produced by Howard Hughes. The movie was denied a certificate of approval and kept out of theaters for years, primarily because promos for the film focused attention almost exclusively on Jane Russell's breasts.

The enforcement of the Production Code led to the dissolution of many local censorship boards. Meanwhile, the U.S. Customs Department prohibited the importation of the foreign film *Ecstasy* (1932), starring Hedy Lamarr, an action which was upheld on appeal.

Provisions of the Code

The Production Code spelled out specific restrictions on movie language and behavior, particularly sex and crime—though Hollywood developed ways to get around some of these restrictions and keep audiences coming back to the theaters. It prohibited nudity, suggestive dances, and the ridicule of religion. It forbade the depiction of illegal drug use, venereal disease, childbirth, and profanity. The language section banned dozens of "offensive" words and phrases, leading to the shocked outcry from many moviegoers when the film *Gone with the Wind* included the word "damn." Criminal activity could not be depicted on film in a way that led viewers to sympathize with criminals. Murder scenes had to be filmed in a way that would discourage imitations in real life, and brutal killings could not be shown in detail. The sanctity of marriage and the home had to be upheld. Adultery and illicit sex, although recognized as sometimes necessary to the plot, could not be explicit or justified and were not supposed to be presented as an attractive option.

The 1950s and early 1960s

Hollywood worked within the confines of the Production Code until the 1950s, by which time the "Golden Age Of Hollywood" had ended, and the movies were faced with very serious competitive threats. The biggest threat came from a new technology, television. Largely due to television, movie attendances plummeted. Movie-makers knew they needed to give the public something it couldn't get on TV, so the old stand-bys that had worked since the beginning of the industry became attractive to them—namely, sex and violence.

In addition to the threat of television, there was also an increasing threat from foreign films, like Vittorio De Sica's *The Bicycle Thief* (1950). Vertical integration in the movie industry had been found to violate anti-trust laws, and studios had been forced to give up ownership of theatres. The studios had no way to keep foreign films out, and the foreign films weren't bound by the Production Code.

It was a time that the Production Code needed to become more flexible. The MPAA revised the code in 1951, but not to make it more flexible, but to make it more rigid. The 1951 revisions spelled out more words and subjects that were prohibited, and no doubt increased the opposition of movie-makers to the code.

At the forefront of challenges to the code was director Otto Preminger, whose films violated the code repeatedly in the 1950s. He made *The Moon is Blue* in 1953, and it was released without a certificate of approval. He also made *The*

Man with the Golden Arm (1955), which dealt with the prohibited subject of drug abuse, and *Anatomy of a Murder* (1959) which dealt with rape. Preminger's films were direct assaults on the authority of the Production Code and, since they were successful, hastened its abandonment.

The end of the Code

When Jack Valenti became President of the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) in 1966, he was immediately faced with a problem regarding language in the film, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Valenti negotiated a compromise: The word *screw* was removed, but other language, including the phrase "*hump the hostess*" remained. The film received Production Code approval despite having language that was clearly prohibited by the code.

The film *Blow-Up* presented a different problem. After the film was denied Production Code approval, MGM released it anyway, the first instance of an MPAA member company distributing a film that didn't have an approval certificate. There was little the MPAA could do about it.

Enforcement had become impossible, and the Production Code was abandoned entirely. The MPAA began working on a rating system, under which there would be virtually no restriction on what could be in a film. The MPAA film rating system went into effect in 1968.