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1st Place Contest Entry: Moviegoers and the Moon in 1953

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Essay:

The Moon is Blue is a film that holds particular relevance for its industrial and cultural implications during the heavily censored Cold War period. Given my decision to view the movie as both a product and a contribution to 1950s discourse regarding a “united” citizenry in the face of the “Red Scare,” the paper I wrote naturally necessitated a more comprehensive analysis of primary source documents, legal memorandums, and reviews of historical scholarly sources in order to establish an argument worthy of objective scrutiny.

For this reason, I decided to utilize the myriad of sources at Leatherby Libraries, from an in-depth study of relevant books, a scouring of online databases to find secondary sources to supplement my discussion, to a review of the Production Code Administration files for *The Moon is Blue*. Given Leatherby’s extensive collection of books about the cinema, with many that provide historical contextualization for filmic practices in Hollywood, it was not difficult to find several pertinent texts through the online catalog. These books primarily helped me develop a more holistic understanding of the period and the factors influencing movie production. Utilizing Otto Preminger’s biography was especially useful by adding to my discussion about his idea of *The Moon is Blue*’s audience, something that contrasted with the censorship authorities’ conceptions of a more fragmented movie-going public.

Aside from books, online databases proved beneficial for their ability to provide scholarly judgments about specific censorship authorities. After learning about all of the sources available to Chapman students involved in film programs through Maria Yanez (who gave a formal tutorial of the online materials and an introduction into the Production Code Administration microfiche during class earlier in the semester), I was able to use her “Subject Guide” to locate specific databases and links to outside online materials. Of these sources, the AFI Catalog was useful in its ability to help distinguish the hubbub surrounding the film’s production. I also found that searching through JSTOR and Academic Search Premier yielded fascinating articles that, though brief in nature, provided micro-histories on certain facets of censorship groups. I found it useful to focus on search criteria that pinpointed this area of interest, utilizing phrases like

“Legion of Decency,” “Production Code,” and “Censorship.” This proved especially useful in tracing the Catholic Legion of Decency’s influence, something that I had only little knowledge of from *The Wages of Sin* by Lea Jacobs. After evaluating these writings, I was astounded at how much Jacobs’ overview was lacking in comprehensiveness. I realized that the topical discussion she provided failed to capture the more complex link between the Production Code Administration (the primary self-regulatory group in Hollywood) and this particular religious faction. In this manner I was able to use online journal articles (with their inherent specificity and conciseness) to thoughtfully and critically evaluate the veracity of more hefty texts.

However, the most unique area of research that I conducted at Leatherby was with the Production Code Administration files on microfilm. Maria Yanez was extremely helpful in showing me how to work the microform scanner in order to copy the file on *The Moon is Blue*. As I read through these documents, I not only discovered personal correspondence between filmmakers and the PCA highlighting the controversy surrounding the film’s inception, but also located relevant legal memorandums with opinions from judiciary authorities demonstrating startlingly blatant evaluations of the Production Code. This was an extremely exciting find because it proves that the Code was becoming outmoded by the early 1950s, placing the shift in attitudes towards film censorship earlier than the time many traditional film texts insinuate. This thrilling experience taught me the tremendous value in viewing primary source documents; secondary sources may provide valid and important contextualization, but sometimes the best evidence for events are found in the materials written explicitly during that situation.

Overall, utilizing the vast resources of Leatherby Libraries not only taught me about the strategies of conducting research to uncover the most relevant information on a topic, but also how a comparison of different types of sources provides the most informative and comprehensive picture of a given topic. I learned that cross-referencing various accounts, from the directorial bravado of Otto Preminger in his autobiography to the subjective interpretation of the Catholic Legion’s ties to Hollywood by Lea Jacobs, illuminates inconsistencies and contradictions in historical reflections. These discrepancies are valuable for their exhibition of

the inherent bias that occurs when writing about the past, but they also helped me develop a healthy appreciation for the accessibility of primary source documents which might clarify these inconsistencies. In this sense, the use of these materials taught me to enter research with skepticism, ready to evaluate rather than passively accept the validity of literature; in turn, this questioning approach might lead to the most sensational finds of all.

Summary:

“There are lots of girls who don’t mind being seduced,” Patty (Maggie McNamara) tells Don (William Holden) in *The Moon is Blue* (Preminger 1953),¹ “Why pick on those who do?” Blatantly honest, Patty’s question of unwanted male attention might also apply to the film’s production, particularly the opinions of prevailing censorship groups who believed it to be their duty to prevent the “seduction” of morally diverse audiences. For its content, *The Moon is Blue* was lambasted by PCA and private censorship authorities, particularly the Catholic Legion of Decency, for its “light and gay treatment of the subject of illicit sex and seduction.”² The movie centers upon the actions of a very honest young woman, Patty, who is not shy about voicing her negative opinions about premarital sex with potential suitors Don and David (David Niven), frustrating them with her obstinacy to remain a “virgin.”

By analyzing the complicated production of the sexually-provocative *The Moon is Blue* in the early 1950s, this essay seeks to isolate the perspectives of censorship groups, artistic authorities, governmental legislatures, and the Production Code Administration in their respective appraisals of the Hollywood industry’s movie-going public. The censorship of this film failed, and referencing communications between studio personnel and the PCA, as well as court documents and scholarly research, this paper highlights how the various organizations’ differing conceptions are relevant with regards to their Cold War context. This period inspired containment ideology in narratives celebrating “universal ideals and patriotic or sacred causes” through the awareness of a “classless society and harmonious capitalist order.”³ Despite the paranoia of the period regarding conformity and suppression of sexuality, when outdated modes of industrial perceptions towards moviegoers met the film’s controversial content, the contentious thematic elements escaped, eventually entering mainstream fare.

¹ *The Moon is Blue*, directed by Otto Preminger (1953; Otto Preminger Films), DVD.

² Joseph Breen to Luigi Luraschi, June 28, 1951, *The Moon is Blue*, MPAA Production Code Administration Collection, Leatherby Libraries, Chapman University, Orange, California.

³ Lary May, *The Big Tomorrow: Hollywood and the Politics of the American Way* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 219.

Though the coarser content of *The Moon is Blue* might appear contradictory (in theme) to the strident regulation of sexuality in containment philosophy, this paper demonstrates how the film's passage is an indication of industrial conformance to notions of a "harmonious" citizenry in 1950s American Cold War culture. This inherent irony, given the passage of a film thoroughly at odds with the period's conventions, is certainly a rarity; yet it happened, seemingly once in a blue moon.

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