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1st Place Research Paper: Moviegoers and the Moon in 1953

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1st Place Research Paper: Moviegoers and the Moon in 1953

Comments

Hannah Gary won First Place in the 2014-2015 Kevin and Tam Ross Undergraduate Research Prize for her essay about researching the industrial and cultural implications of the film *The Moon is Blue* during the heavily censored Cold War period. This essay is the original scholarship that emerged from that research.

Moviegoers and the Moon in 1953

Hannah Gary
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“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. 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 (PCA) in their respective appraisals of the Hollywood industry’s movie-going public. 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.”² 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.

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.”³ Based upon a Hugh Herbert play, the film was produced by

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

² Lary May, *The Big Tomorrow: Hollywood and the Politics of the American Way* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 219.

³ Letter from Joseph Breen to Luigi Luraschi, June 28, 1951, *The Moon is Blue*, Motion Picture Directors and Producers Association Production Code Administration Collection (MPAA PCA), Leatherby Libraries, Chapman University, Orange, California.

the independent production company Otto Preminger Films under the direction of Otto Preminger, and violated the Code's regulation that "no film shall infer that casual or promiscuous sex relationships are the accepted or common thing."⁴ 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." Despite the PCA's citations of the initial script and Joseph Breen's claim that "it will require a drastic rewriting of the story as it now stands, to bring it within the provisions of the Code,"⁵ Preminger proceeded with the film's production. Considering the climate of the 1950s, in which the threat of the Cold War initiated numerous measures of "containment," it may not be surprising that the primary censorship experts at the PCA regarded the content of this film as controversial and subject to abbreviation. As Elaine Tyler May argues, "containment" did not just apply to the control of Communism abroad, but worked on the home front as well through the restriction of premarital sex as a means to safeguard family values, ideals that were considered by experts to be an "antidote" to the "unrelated dangers" of the Cold War.⁶ *The Moon is Blue's* treatment of Patty as an exception to the norm, positing her as a "virgin" in spite of the predominance of promiscuity, obviously counters this advocacy by Cold War authorities to minimize sex before marriage. In this sense, the content of the film appears to contradict guidelines for morality established by "experts" during the Cold War, proving to be problematic in the release of the film.

⁴ Gerald C. Gardner, "Appendix I: The Motion Picture Production Code," *The Censorship Papers: Movie Censorship Letters from the Hays Office, 1934-1968* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1987), 209.

⁵ Letter from Joseph Breen to Martin Quigley, January 26, 1953, *The Moon is Blue*, MPAA PCA, Leatherby Libraries, Chapman University, Orange, California.

⁶ Elaine Tyler May, "Explosive Issues: Sex, Women, and the Bomb," in *Recasting America: Culture and Politics in the Age of the Cold War*, ed. Lary May (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 154.

The Production Code Administration was established as a form of industrial self-regulation and required that censors remain attentive to differing groups and perspectives of moviegoers so as to strategically and effectively promote money-making films. The PCA was organized because “executives saw movies as commodities” so, “its text concerned morals, but its adoption was dictated by money.”⁷ Logically, if the PCA could effectively produce a product that differing censorship groups might accept, it would prove to be more lucrative. However, as Leff demonstrates, there was essentially a dualism inherent in the aims of the PCA; on its surface it appeared to be about establishing “morals” for all moviegoers, yet it was primarily influenced by industrial motivations, namely, profitability. In order to accomplish this, one of the PCA’s primary duties consisted of “evaluation” during which the Administration isolated “films or elements within films likely to offend reform groups or provoke action by government regulatory agencies.”⁸ It was imperative that the PCA be aware of the differing views of acceptable content for a varying public so as to effectively assess the content of films and obtain the most amount of money. As Jacobs notes, this led to an extensive “evaluation” of the ideologically unique perspectives of filmic consumers. In the case of *The Moon is Blue*, Joseph Breen of the PCA expresses frustration at the necessity of these ties to differing perspectives, stating that they “would like, as much as anybody else, to see the industry relieved of the financial hair-shirt that has been imposed upon it by political censor boards.”⁹ In spite of this, Breen obviously recognizes the importance of the Production Code since the adjustment of content could result in maximum profitability.

⁷ Leonard J. Leff, “The Breeding of America,” *Modern Language Association* 106, no. 3 (1991): 433-434, <http://www.jstor.org.libproxy.chapman.edu/stable/462777>.

⁸ Lea Jacobs, *The Wages of Sin: Censorship and the Fallen Woman Film, 1928-1942* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 21-22.

⁹ Letter from Joseph Breen to Sidney Schreiber, January 21, 1954, *The Moon is Blue*, MPAA PCA, Leatherby Libraries, Chapman University, Orange, California.

Not only did the money-driven industrial factors determine the PCA's assertion of a fragmented audience, but the surface "morality" prescribed and enforced by the PCA's monitoring of Hollywood films recognized the differentiated assortment of moviegoers. This is particularly evident in the concept of maturity, as revealed by the case of *The Moon is Blue*. In a reply to Mrs. John Dancak inquiring about the withholding of the "Seal" for *The Moon is Blue* due to teenage audiences, Vizzard notes that Dancak was "right in presuming that, while the principal concern of the Code is that portion of the audience which is morally immature, the Code operation does not by any means stop there, and is concerned with false values in films at any level whatsoever."¹⁰ Vizzard's statement verifies the particulars of the PCA's enforcement of censorship, namely that the "Code" was organized in order to protect the "immature" from offensive content. Though he immediately amends this statement by applying the concepts to all "false values," Vizzard's initial assertion implies that the Code was designed, principally, to preserve the integrity of a subgroup of people, those that might be "morally" impressionable. This is not surprising, given the precedent of the PCA to be cognizant of "more abstract, and scientifically respectable, discourse on the psychological effects and social consequences of film viewing," like the Payne Fund Studies, which primarily "dealt with the effects of film viewing on young children."¹¹ Thus, the surface "morality" enforced by the PCA resulted from their cognizance of the public as clearly varied, differing in beliefs and status.

The potent Catholic Legion of Decency voiced its dissent towards *The Moon is Blue*, a hefty threat given their ability to "Condemn" films they deemed immoral. The Legion retained similar predilections as the PCA in regards to moral content and their acknowledgement of

¹⁰Letter from John Vizzard to Mrs. John Dancak, August 30, 1954, *The Moon is Blue*, MPAA Production Code Administration Collection, Leatherby Libraries, Chapman University, Orange, California.

¹¹ Lea Jacobs, *The Wages of Sin*, 4-5.

youthful innocence and “immaturity.” In response to the film’s release, the Archbishop of New York, Francis Cardinal Spellman, argued that “the picture bears a serious potential influence for evil, especially endangering our youth, tempting them to entertain ideas of behavior conflicting with the moral law, inciting to juvenile delinquency.”¹² Spellman was obviously worried about the adverse effects of film in relation to teenage rebellion, but, significantly, he also isolates this group as a specific, more gullible division of the broader Hollywood audience. Though the Legion “claimed to be speaking for the majority of their fellow citizens, a cultural majority powerless in the face of amoral, monied conglomerates,”¹³ the truth was more complex given their underlying notions of who comprised the movie-going public and, importantly, of whom within this “majority” might be placed in danger by the films. Gerald Donnelly, writing in the 1930s, immediately recognized that “the chief purpose of the movement was to rid the screen of morally subversive stories – stories that lowered traditional moral standards, that persuaded people, and especially the young, to accept false principles of conduct.”¹⁴ Essentially, the Legion saw Hollywood consumers not only differentiated by age group, but also in varying levels of moral corruptibility. This, in turn, indicates the Legion’s underlying understanding of a heterogeneous group of individuals as the moviegoers of Hollywood films.

As *The Moon is Blue* demonstrates, however, the similarity between the notions of the Catholic Legion of Decency regarding “immaturity” and the PCA are reflective of a shared awareness of a mixed public. Though Jacobs “dispute[s] the claim, advanced by some film histories, that after 1934 censorship reflected the values and beliefs espoused by the Catholic

¹² Francis Cardinal Spellman, “Condemned Film Overrides Moral Law, Cardinal Asserts,” *The Moon is Blue*, MPAA PCA, Leatherby Libraries, Chapman University, Orange, California.

¹³ Una M. Cadegan, “Guardians of Democracy or Cultural Storm Troopers? American Catholics and the Control of Popular Media, 1934-1966,” *The Catholic Historical Review* 87, no. 2 (2001): 272, <http://www.jstor.org.libproxy.chapman.edu/stable/25025928>.

¹⁴ Gerald B. Donnelly, “The Motion Picture and the Legion of Decency,” *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 2, no. 1 (1938): 42, <http://www.jstor.org.libproxy.chapman.edu/stable/2744777>.

Legion of Decency” as “regulation did not entail the simple assimilation of the demands of this or any other pressure group,”¹⁵ it remained highly important that the PCA comply with, or at least acknowledge, the Legion’s perspectives. In regards to *The Moon is Blue*, Vizzard responded to the Legion’s apprehension about the film’s release by stating that “it is more encouraging than you know to receive the support of such a powerful and influential body, enlisted behind the values which the motion picture Code represents.”¹⁶ Vizzard obviously differentiates the Code and the Legion, though identifying a similarity in “values.” Subtly, he also points to an underlying power dynamic in which he emphasizes that the Legion stands “behind” the Code, as much as they wished to speak, as Cadegan describes, for the “majority.” However, the separation between the two organizations remained murky, evidenced by the correspondence between the Legion and PCA in numerous memos considering the censorship of *The Moon is Blue*. The collusion between the two seemed so apparent that it led to Edward Jost, a critic, to inquire about “the connection between the Code and the Legion of Decency,” remarking that he thought “there is a great deal of confusion about this whole situation, both in general and in regard to ‘*The Moon is Blue*.’”¹⁷ In response to this, Vizzard succinctly responded that “the Legion of Decency is an organization entirely apart and separate from the Code.”¹⁸ This sequence of communications does not deconstruct Jacobs’ argument against the PCA being a front for the ideals of the Legion, but the likeness between the two groups substantiates their similar perceptions of moviegoers as diverse in age and moral gullibility.

In contrast, Otto Preminger, the director of *The Moon is Blue*, understood his audience to be homogenous in regards to their rights as members of the United States. Early in the

¹⁵ Lea Jacobs, *The Wages of Sin*, 22.

¹⁶ Letter from John Vizzard to J. J. Doyle, July 27, 1953, *The Moon is Blue*, MPAA PCA, Leatherby Libraries, Chapman University, Orange, California.

¹⁷ Letter from Edward Jost to MPAA, September 11, 1953, Ibid.

¹⁸ Letter from John Vizzard to Edward Jost, September 14, 1953, Ibid.

production of the film, he argued that the film was “perfectly acceptable for general audience consumption”¹⁹ and, later, that the “sex” (the primary area subjected to the PCA’s ire) in the film was “handled in such a way that it [could not] conceivably harm those whom the Code was created to protect,” using two supportive screening crowds as evidence.²⁰ The people that Preminger conceives the Code “protects” are the individuals that attended *The Moon is Blue*’s exhibition, groups of random American citizens variable in moral standing (as would be classified by both the Legion and PCA). Furthermore, as he later noted, he “did not believe that movie audiences were different or that they should be protected from something freely available on the stage.”²¹ This is fundamentally different than the PCA’s stance on the matter, as Joseph Breen argues “the legitimate stage is a totally different medium, which very materially affects the moral equation.”²² While the PCA perceived differences between the viewers of stage performances and movie screenings, Preminger insisted upon universal audiences, undifferentiated by class or social situation. Preminger later remarked that “the reason [he] fought censorship was not because [he] thought that a few cuts or changes in a film would destroy an artistic masterpiece, but because [he] believe[d] that permitting those cuts would be a step, no matter how small, toward the loss of [the nation’s] liberty.”²³ For Preminger, the moviegoers of his films were Americans, a single group with rights protecting their freedom to not only produce films but also to determine what they might see. He did not see distinctions between those within it, but recognized Hollywood consumers as members of a broader, more cohesive and autonomous society.

¹⁹ Memo by Geoffrey Shurlock, January 6, 1953, Ibid.

²⁰ Letter from Otto Preminger to Joseph Breen, April 13, 1953, Ibid.

²¹ Otto Preminger, *Preminger: An Autobiography* (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1977), 109.

²² Letter from Joseph Breen to Sidney Schreiber, January 12, 1954, *The Moon is Blue*, MPAA PCA, Leatherby Libraries, Chapman University, Orange, California.

²³ Otto Preminger, *Preminger: An Autobiography*, 119.

The scandalous content of *The Moon is Blue* led to its censorship in two states, Maryland and Kansas, which, in turn, incurred appeals cases to permit the film's exhibition in these locales. In the case of Maryland under the authority of Judge Moser, the legislature agreed with Preminger in regards to their conception of moviegoers' nature as a united citizenry. In his comments on the case and the claim that "obscenity" warranted its censorship in Maryland, Moser references another case, *United States v. Levine*, which involved the restriction of book sales in 1936 under Judge Hand. Moser, in explaining Hand's obscenity test for print media as the "community's standard of decency," applies this to filmic content, arguing that "one cannot consider, in applying this test, only the sensibilities of the prudish or condemn a work as salacious because of its possible effect upon 'the ignorant, the immature, and the sensually inclined.'"²⁴ Unlike the Legion and the PCA, Moser argues that viewers should not be categorized based upon their differing levels of virtuousness and integrity.

Moser's use of this particular case to substantiate his argument is significant, particularly because Judge Hand concluded that "what counts is [the object's] effect, not upon any particular class, but upon all those whom it is likely to reach."²⁵ Beyond moral corruptibility, Hand delved into the issue of class and the fact that censorship should not be applied based upon competing levels of societal status. Moser takes this a step further in his deconstruction of the Code, stating that "it has been said that the commandment of the Code as it has been administered is 'Thou shalt not offend anyone, anywhere, at any time'...To avoid offence to any group on moral, political or economic grounds may be a profitable rule for the industry but as a legal rule it is

²⁴ Memorandum by Herman Moser, August 31, 1953, *The Moon is Blue*, MPAA PCA, Leatherby Libraries, Chapman University, Orange, California.

²⁵ *United States v. Levine*, 83 F.2d 156 (2nd Circ. 1936), at *157.

objectionable.”²⁶ Moser not only questions the legality of the Code as an authoritative document, but does so by contesting its ability to censor content based upon the variance in audience members’ innocence, “political” leanings, and financial situations. Moser may have been aware of moviegoers differing ages and positions within society, but he nevertheless treats them as a whole; their rights are unilateral and should not be restricted on the grounds of their internal divisions. This conclusion may be because of Moser’s status as a Judge, an elected representative for a larger body of people, but it is nonetheless important in regards to the film’s ultimate passage into mainstream exhibition.

While the presiding experts of censorship (the PCA) as well as private groups (like the Catholic Legion of Decency) treated moviegoers as citizens with varying degrees of morality and in need of differing requirements for filmic content, both Preminger (the filmmaker) and Judge Moser (of the Maryland legislature) demonstrated a more holistic understanding of Hollywood consumers. The content of *The Moon is Blue* may have opposed the proposed behavior sanctioned by Cold War experts regarding sexuality, yet its ability to eventually be released might actually be related to the similar conceptions of moviegoers ascertained by Preminger and Judge Moser (whose actions led to the film’s release in Maryland). As Lary May describes, the Cold War’s influence on moviemaking advocated by Eric Johnston (later head of the MPPA) was one in which unity was espoused at all costs, leading to a preponderance of narratives with battles that “demanded death or containment of adversaries rather than altering society in order to accommodate competing views within a monolithic civic sphere.”²⁷ It was essential that, during the Cold War, those in the United States regarded themselves as unified against Communism, despite internal divisions. The PCA and Legion, rather than treating the

²⁶ Memorandum by Moser, August 31, 1953, *The Moon is Blue*, MPAA PCA Collection.

²⁷ Lary May, *The Big Tomorrow*, 265.

moviegoers as members of a consolidated America, highlighted differences, particularly in maturity and morality. They also demonstrated an elitist attitude that implied their censorship status was somehow elevated, providing them with the right to pronounce judgment for the majority of moviegoers. Looking at the public as a whole, Moser and Preminger's perception not only proved to be congruous with "unified" Cold War ideology, but their actions may hint at another reason why this film ultimately was released: their conception of a mainstream, harmonized America triumphed against the more divisive understanding perpetuated by the predominant censors.

The Moon is Blue provides an intriguing case study in which its controversial content entered mainstream cinematic fare during a period rife with "containment" ideology and fears of Communism. Though this may seem surprising, given the tendency for rampant fears and strict conformity during the "Red Scare," *The Moon is Blue* demonstrates a deviation from the period's normative denouncement of sexual content. The censorship of this film failed and, as demonstrated, it was revealed through complex industrial conversations of subtle yet fundamental attitudes underlying the differing authorities of the PCA, the Catholic Legion of Decency, Otto Preminger, and Judge Moser of the Maryland legislature. The PCA and Catholic Legion of Decency's conceptions, with a history of identifying movie-goers as immature and fragmented, stood in opposition to the more homogenous perspective of audiences perpetuated by Preminger and Moser. The film's passage, then, may allude to the incompatibility between the prevailing historical perspectives of the censors and postwar America. 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. 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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