

How the Catholic Church Censored Hollywood

Amy Carlyle

Department of Film, Television, and Media Studies
School of Film and Television, Loyola Marymount University
Mentored by Dr. Richard P. Hadley, Jr.

Abstract: From the 1930s through 1960s, the Catholic Church protested and banned films containing content deemed immoral by Church standards through an organization called the Legion of Decency. My research project seeks to examine the social, political, economic, and cinematic trends that most contributed to the Legion's hold on Hollywood, and how cultural shifts in the 1960s enabled mainstream filmmakers and producers to explore subjects beyond the Church's boundaries.

Introduction

What if simply watching a movie was enough to condemn you to hell? According to the Catholic Church, those who viewed films that did not meet their rigorous content standards would be met with such a fate. From the 1930s through 1960s, different moral metrics dominated Hollywood and banned films that included certain controversial topics, such as the industry's own Hayes Production Code, but perhaps most powerful were the guidelines set forth by the Legion of Decency, a Church-organized collective that censored Hollywood studios through protest and financial pressure. My research project will examine the social, political, economic, and industry-specific factors that most significantly contributed to the Legion's hold on Hollywood to better understand how such a rigid standard was upheld by industry-leading studios for so long, and ultimately why cultural shifts in the 1960s enabled mainstream filmmakers to break free from the Church's rules.

Background

From its founding in 1933 until the 1960s, the Legion was incredibly influential in American filmmaking. The Legion of Decency assigned letter grades to movies based on content, with an A-I marking morally unobjectionable content for all audiences, an A-II designation for morally unobjectionable content for adult audiences, a B marking films morally objectionable in part for all audiences, and C noting condemned films for all audiences (Corliss). Condemnation-worthy themes included anything against Catholic teaching, such as immodest clothing, swearing, promiscuity, violence, crime, divorce, and even elements of the paranormal (Mashon). The Legion exercised its control in numerous ways. Sometimes it outright banned Catholics from viewing movies; this was most common for European films shown in the U.S. rather than American-made films (Facey). More often, the Legion would encourage self-

ensorship for movie studios by organizing boycotts of indecent films that were so financially damaging that making an indecent film in the first place would not have been worthwhile anymore. That way, studios would have to produce more morally correct content to survive (Facey). Additionally, the Legion would ask studios to change questionable content in films, and then would offer the film a higher rating as a reward. For example, the Legion threatened to give Stanley Kubrick's 1960 film *Spartacus* a C grade unless Universal Pictures removed six minutes of the movie that the Church found too gory (Criterion Channel). The Legion similarly threatened Warner Brothers over how Elia Kazan's *A Streetcar Named Desire* portrayed sexual violence on screen in 1951 (Doherty). Both studios agreed to the Legion's demands to avoid condemnation ratings, and in turn, a poor audience turnout.

During and following the Great Depression, many Americans turned towards religion – specifically Catholicism, but also other sects of Christianity – to find peace from the financial stress they faced. To follow the faith more closely, many adopted a strict interpretation of morality and decency which influenced audience interest in films (Black). At this time, the primary movie theater audience tended to be “younger, poorer, and less educated” overlapping with the population that most strongly embraced Catholicism that tended to be “even younger, poorer, and less educated than the American majority” (Corliss). This demographic shift impacted the financial success of films because the mass movie audience now sought films of a different moral caliber than before (Black). The Legion of Decency, spearheaded by a small group of priests, emerged to advocate for this moral standard during the film development and production processes. In addition, they encouraged Catholics to recruit fellow churchgoers to take on the Legion's cause. For example, in Sunday masses, congregations would participate in Pledge Sunday in which they would vow only to watch morally acceptable films, saying:

I hereby promise to remain away from all motion pictures except those which do not offend decency and Christian morality. I promise to further secure as many members as possible for the Legion of Decency. I make this protest in a spirit of self-respect, and with the conviction that the American public does not demand filthy pictures, but clean entertainment and educational features. (*New York Times*, Pattison)

By persuading this mass audience of Catholics to boycott movies that failed to meet their criteria for decency, they hoped to pressure the major Hollywood studios into more thoughtfully funding and creating movies (Facey).

The Legion of Decency's control was not necessarily one-sided as Hollywood studios initially put up little resistance to the Legion's demands (Hanlon). While the boycotts certainly put financial pressure on the studios, the studios were not explicitly censored – rather, they chose to create films that would appeal to this new audience and become financially successful (Couvares). This tactic was not new to Hollywood, as the industry always sought to make projects that would appeal to viewers, even when “indecent” crime melodramas were the popular trend (Corliss). In addition, by pleasing the Church and adopting the Legion's standards, the major studios also hoped to avoid any greater restrictions that might be imposed by the government (Peterson). While the Legion gained traction, there was concern that the Roosevelt administration might create a federal agency to enforce content standards on film and television projects (Peterson). After the 1915 Supreme Court decision *Mutual Film Corporation v. Industrial Commission of Ohio* ruled that free speech protection laws did not cover motion pictures, such an agency became a very real possibility, so from the studios' perspective, accepting the Legion's stance early on signaled to the government that such an agency might not be necessary (Muth, Peterson).

Despite the Legion of Decency's potency in Hollywood for a time, its reign was short-lived as boycotts ceased and audiences regained interest in content that would have previously been terribly immoral. One factor that contributed to this shift was the rise of television

viewership – by 1949, half of all American family households owned a television (Doherty). Television fought movie theaters for audience attention, and the convenience of a television in the home influenced many to frequent movie theaters less often, leading to more than 4,000 movie theaters permanently closing from 1946 to 1956 (Doherty). To distinguish itself and regain audience attention, the film industry had to create content vastly different from what was available on the television screen (Doherty). While television programs tended to play it safe with content, especially considering advertiser interests, the movies opted to provide audiences with spectacle and drama (Doherty). Like before, the studios shifted their content output to yield greater profit.

Methods

To answer my research question, I will collect and synthesize information from primary and secondary sources to develop the most accurate portrait of the Hollywood film landscape during this thirty-year period, and more specifically, the Legion of Decency's actions and impact during that time. Through greater analysis of the social, political, and economic undercurrents affecting producer and audience interest, as well as audience engagement with the Church, I can better understand how the Legion was able to acquire the power that it did and why its power was short-lived. Two sources I will rely on include Gregory Black's book *Hollywood Censored: Morality Codes, Catholics, and the Movies* and Paul W. Facey's *Legion of Decency: A Sociological Analysis of the Emergence and Development of a Social Pressure Group*, both of which are cited heavily by the other sources I have read and hope to include in my work. These sources offer broad yet thoughtful accounts of the Legion of Decency; by supplementing these perspectives with the other sources I have compiled, I can identify counterarguments and loose details that need further explanation, such as how Ann Mairin Hanlon's "Mass Culture: Catholic

Americanism at the Movies” offers alternative motivations to those provided by Black and criticizes his characterization of the major studios.

Beyond the written sources I will review, I also plan to view three films as examples of the ideas discussed by the sources’ authors. I have selected Otto Preminger’s *The Moon is Blue*, Billy Wilder’s *The Seven Year Itch*, and Roman Polanski’s *Rosemary’s Baby*. As I view these films, I will note how these themes are represented in the screenplay. In addition, I will observe how each film represents a particular effect of the Legion of Decency’s mission: *The Moon is Blue* is an example of a film that was condemned immediately upon its release because of how it romanticized promiscuity; *The Seven Year Itch* is an example of a film that was edited last-minute to avoid a condemnation rating – its production company, Twentieth Century Fox, removed scenes at the request of the Legion of Decency in exchange for a B rating to protect the financial success of the movie; *Rosemary’s Baby* is an example of a film that was condemned but still achieved mainstream success upon its release because of the Legion’s declining power in the later 1960s (Doherty). Furthermore, I can draw comparisons between *The Moon is Blue* and *Rosemary’s Baby* since both earned C ratings yet both were released at different times, the first film marking the peak of the Legion of Decency’s control and the latter marking its dwindling hold on Hollywood (Doherty). After reading these sources and viewing the films I have chosen, I will compose an essay documenting my findings.

Expected Results

Through greater analysis of the social, political, economic, and industry-specific events of this time, plus the themes represented in these three films, I hope to contribute to existing research by composing a summary of what I have found that builds from and synthesizes each source into one cohesive account of the Legion’s history and effects. Monumental events like the

Great Depression and World War II undoubtedly shaped both how many Americans experienced religion and how many American audience members sought films to watch; both of these influences on demographic, in turn, affected how producers and studios decided what content to create and how to allocate funding to different projects to see the maximum return on investment for box office releases. Since history is ultimately a narrative, it is essential to properly weigh all the factors and motivations at play in driving each actor; utilizing numerous sources in creating this systematic review will allow me to most accurately characterize how each group involved allowed for this era in American film history to occur.

Conclusion

In the present, it may be difficult to imagine how a single religious denomination could exercise this much control over such a massive industry in the United States, but different societal factors enabled the Legion of Decency to manipulate how films were financed and produced from the 1930s to 1960s. Through analysis of sources, I hope to accurately synthesize an account of how this organization rose to power and fostered such a shift in Hollywood.

References

- Black, Gregory D. *Hollywood Censored: Morality Codes, Catholics, and the Movies*. Cambridge Univ. Press, 2001.
- Corliss, Richard. "The Legion of Decency." *Film Comment*, vol. 4, no. 4, Film Society of Lincoln Center, 1968, pp. 24–59, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43753211>.
- Couvares, Francis G. "Hollywood, Main Street, and the Church: Trying to Censor the Movies Before the Production Code." *American Quarterly*, vol. 44, no. 4, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992, pp. 584–616, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2713216>.
- Doherty, William Ph.D., "The American Catholic Church Censors the Movies" (2019). Department of History and Social Sciences. 19. https://mushare.marian.edu/fp_hss/19
- Facey, Paul W. *Legion of Decency: A Sociological Analysis of the Emergence and Development of a Social Pressure Group*. Arno Press, 1974.
- Handy, Robert T. "The American Religious Depression, 1925-1935." *Church History*, vol. 29, no. 1, [American Society of Church History, Cambridge University Press], 1960, pp. 3–16, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3161613>.
- Hanlon, Ann Mairin. "Mass Culture: Catholic Americanism at the Movies, 1930-1947." *Thesis / Dissertation ETD*, Digital Repository at the University of Maryland, 2007.
- Mashon, Mike, and James Bell. "Pre-Code Hollywood. (Cover Story)." *Sight & Sound*, vol. 24, no. 5, May 2014, pp. 20–26. *EBSCOhost*, Search.ebscohost.com/login.aspxdirect=true&db=f3h&AN=95445521&site=ehost-live&scope=site.
- Muth, Chaz. "Catholicism Influenced Moviemaking from the Early Days of Film." *Archdiocese of Baltimore*, 20 Dec. 2019, <https://www.archbalt.org/catholicism-influenced-moviemaking-from-the-early-days-of-film/>.
- "National Legion of Decency Asks More Family Films of Hollywood." *The New York Times*, 4 Dec. 1964.
- Pattison, Mark, and Julie Asher. "A Look Back at the Legion of Decency." *CNS Blog*, Catholic News Service, 17 Aug. 2017, <https://cnsblog.wordpress.com/2017/08/17/a-look-back-at-the-legion-of-decency/>.
- Peterson, Dean. "How the Catholic Church Censored the Golden Age of Hollywood." *Vox, Vox*, 11 Apr. 2018, <https://www.vox.com/videos/2018/4/11/17224220/catholic-church-censorship-golden-age-hollywood-hays-code>.

Pondillo, Bob. "A 'Legion of Decency' for 1950s Television?" *Television Quarterly*, vol. 32, no. 2/3, Summer/Fall 2001, pp. 16–21. *EBSCOhost*, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=f3h&AN=10686347&site=ehost-live&scope=site.

"Spartacus: 1967 Finale." *The Criterion Channel*, <https://www.criterionchannel.com/spartacus/videos/spartacus-deleted-scenes-1967-finale>.

Budget

Through library access, I can acquire all my necessary sources and films for free, so this project does not require any material costs. To account for time, this project could warrant a stipend at \$15/hour in accordance with Loyola Marymount University research assistant pay. For an estimated 5 hours and 40 minutes of watch time plus additional time for reading and writing, my total budget amounts to \$412.50 for 27.5 hours on the project. I estimate that the project will take two weeks to complete alongside my regular class and work schedules.

WEEK ONE – 13 hours

Day 1 – Three hours

- Reading
- Pay particular attention to 1930s-40s and the set up for the Legion of Decency

Day 2 – Three hours

- Reading and research
- Pay particular attention to 1950s and early 1960s and the peak of the Legion of Decency

Day 3 – Three hours

- Reading and research
- Pay particular attention to late 1960s and 70s and the decline of the Legion of Decency

Day 4 – Two hours

- View *The Moon is Blue*
- Take notes after

Day 5 – Two hours

- View *The Seven Year Itch*
- Take notes after

WEEK TWO – 14.5 hours

Day 1 – Two and a half hours

- View *Rosemary's Baby*
- Take notes after

Day 2 – Three hours

- Make citations and add any additional sources found to bibliography
- Compose outline of essay

- Begin writing

Day 3 – Three hours

- Write essay
- Aim to be close to completion

Day 4 – Three hours

- Finish essay draft
- Revise

Day 5 – Three hours

- Finalize essay