Revisiting Hollywood's Censor: Joseph I. Breen & The Production Code Administration (2007)

How the American establishment censored Hollywood during its "Golden Age"

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The American establishment, like every ruling elite, has always been afraid of the truth, because the truth inevitably angers and radicalizes.

The notorious Motion Picture Production Code, strongly enforced from 1934 until the 1960s, which set down moral and social guidelines for what could and could not be treated or discussed in Hollywood films, was one of the major efforts to suppress social reality. In addition, there were simultaneously hundreds of censor boards in the US in the hands of local police departments. As we have noted before, it is a tribute to the ingenuity and determination of filmmakers that so many honest and troubling works emerged in these unfavorable conditions.

Today, at a time of social crisis, when the preemptive censorship of "divisive" oppositional views and the promotion of pro-military, "pro-American" propaganda are pressing and disturbing realities, it seems worth revisiting Thomas Doherty's *Joseph I. Breen & The Production Code Administration (2007, Columbia University Press).* The bulk of the biography covers the period from 1934 to 1954, when Joseph Breen was the enforcer of the Production Code.

Ironically, while this period is known for the strict censorship of Hollywood movies that prevailed, it has also (and rightly) earned the title of the "Golden Age" of American movies. How can this be? More about that later.

Doherty's account of Breen's pre-Code life offers a credible and valuable explanation for the latter's ascension to arguably the most powerful position in Hollywood.

Born in 1888, Joseph Breen's rigidly Irish Catholic family and education resulted in a perspective that was "peculiarly Victorian in its characteristics" and a lifelong animosity toward those who offered criticism of the Catholic Church or viewed it as a threat to American democracy. From then on, as Doherty notes, the future censor would work tirelessly "to make piety and patriotism one doctrine, indivisible."

Breen bounced between journalistic and government service jobs during his pre-Hollywood adult life. His job as foreign correspondent for the International News Service covering the Russo-Polish war in 1920 reinforced his anti-communism—e.g., he praised the Poles for beating back the Bolsheviks, or the "hordes of wild men out of Russia." Breen would remain a fervent anti-communist for life. In 1923, he wrote that Soviet communism represented "the rankest kind of perversion. … It is Godlessness run to chaos." ("The Philosophy of Bolshevism," in the *National Catholic Welfare Council Bulletin*, 1923)

In 1931, he used his Catholic pedigree and public relations experience to turn a temporary job with the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), the film industry trade association, as a censor of negative statements and stories concerning Hollywood in daily newspapers into a permanent position as assistant to the president of MPPDA, Will H. Hays.

The WSWS has previously noted that the Motion Picture Production Code, drawn up by Martin Quigley, a devout Irish Catholic and editor and publisher of a film trade weekly, and Rev. Daniel A. Lord, a Jesuit priest, and adopted by film producers and distributors in 1930, was remarkable for "the extent of its repressiveness and worship of conformism and the existing state of things."

However, in the first few years of its existence, the Code was not effectively enforced, largely because the final decision in regard to censoring a given film was made by studio representatives themselves. Hays chose Joseph Breen to solve this problem.

Once in his position as head of the Production Code Administration, Breen eliminated the Producers Appeal Board and created a repressive body based on religious bigotry and social reaction that would control Hollywood for decades. This outfit would have final say before and during a film's production, and on its final cut.

Doherty notes, "More than the literature and paintings the Church had been censoring for centuries, the motion picture was peculiarly accessible, hence peculiarly dangerous, and hence peculiarly in need of custodial oversight."

Breen stayed true to promoting reactionary moral values and American patriotism. A film version of Sinclair Lewis's novel *It Can't Happen Here*, for example, never reached production because it portrayed a future fascist America.

On the other hand, after viewing Charles Chaplin's anti-Nazi satire *The Great Dictator* (1940), Breen wrote a letter to Chaplin apologizing for having to make "small and picayune" changes in what was otherwise "superb screen entertainment." (Breen was not an uncultured philistine and his aesthetic sensibility helped to make him more palatable to the Hollywood filmmakers.)

During World War II, a strict adherence to the Code caused much of Hollywood and the general public to believe that Breen had fallen behind the times. Realistic battle language was regularly censored, while Breen's fanatical anti-communism led him to denounce Hollywood's pro-Soviet films, including *Mission to Moscow* and *Song of Russia*, as subversive propaganda. He was vindicated, so to speak, by the ensuing purges of left-wing figures in Hollywood.

Big political and cultural changes in the postwar period, including the influence of European and art films—along with Breen's general weariness as the result of scrutinizing thousands of films—led to his retirement in 1954 and eventually to the end of the rating system in 1968, the year of Breen's death.

In this reviewer's opinion, Doherty is not fully able to make sense of the contradictions of the Breen epoch. His suggestion that the Golden Age might not have been so "golden" without the Production Code Administration is highly questionable to say the least.

Doherty argues in the biography's final chapter that "To think of Breen as a bluenose censor, scissors at hand, ripping into a beautiful tapestry to shred what repulsed his eyes, is to miss his method and mission. … He expunged dialogue, vetoed scenarios, banned novels, and pronounced projects dead on arrival. However, Breen's enduring legacy lies in what he worked into Hollywood cinema: a moral vision, outlined by the Production Code as read, felt, and interpreted by a Victorian Irish Catholic. In auteurist terms, Breen promulgated a set of laws (the moral universe) and landscapes (the visible images)." (Yes, but what "laws" and "landscapes"?) Doherty even cites Geoffrey Shurlock: "The Code wasn't as much of a tragedy as a lot of liberal writers like to make it out."

Doherty then goes on, more critically: "Harder to focus on is the never seen and might-have-been: the scenarios strangled at birth, the films that failed to bloom, or grew to life stunted and deformed, the issues not raised, the blinders that kept Hollywood from facing the menace of Nazism, the blight of racism, or the other ethical dilemmas and social problems omitted from the Baltimore catechism. … The Code not only smothered worthy studio projects but its stranglehold on independent production and affiliated theaters cut off the creative oxygen available for all cinema."

Doherty also notes that Breen's Code prevented production of the above-mentioned *It Can't Happen Here* and Herman Mankiewicz's anti-Hitler screenplay *The Mad Dog of Europe*, and effectively blocked the distribution of two films—*No Greater Sin (1941)* and *Damaged Goods (1937)*—that dealt with venereal disease.

This all ends up something of a jumble. It wasn't, as Doherty implies, censorship and restraint that enabled Hollywood's filmmakers of the 1930s and 1940s to make more textured and complex work. Breen was not responsible for the richer filmmaking—it occurred despite him.

Doherty also doubts that, with or without the Code, Hollywood's first-please-the-customer business orientation would have honestly and critically faced the major problems of the day—i.e., the Great Depression, the Second World War and the Cold War. This misses the point. Breen's censorship office was part of Hollywood's overall big business and repressive structure.

Profit-taking has always been integral to studio movie-making. This does not mean, however, that American filmmaking was nothing but a mouthpiece for commercial interests. The Depression and the rise of fascism in Europe had a major impact on American artists, pushing many to consider the Soviet Union and socialism as an alternative. The writers and directors were working in a generally more cultured and left-wing atmosphere, in the midst of enormous events. They knew something of life.

Moreover, Doherty fails to recognize the influence of the émigré directors—who brought with them the ideological and stylistic features of early twentieth century Europe—on Hollywood's Golden Age. Silent filmmaker F.W. Murnau, for example, influenced nearly all the significant American directors of this period, including Frank Borzage, King Vidor, Frank Capra and John Ford. Fritz Lang's classic *You Only Live Once* helped give birth to the realistic crime dramas of the late 1930s that raised the censorial ire of Joseph Breen.

These directors produced the most courageous, fully realized movies of Hollywood's Golden Age. What more might these artists have achieved had they been liberated from Breen's ability to determine if their films would ever be made, let alone sliced up mid-production or during the final cut? Would filmmaking free of the Hollywood structures as a whole have been able to treat the human situation more honestly? Of course.

Doherty also claims that although Hollywood and America in general were suffused with anti-Semitism during the early-to-mid 1930s, "No antisemitism filtered into Hollywood cinema on Breen's watch."

Doherty concedes that Breen sounded anti-Semitic in a "small cache" of letters written in 1932 in which he called the studio heads "damn Jews [who] are a dirty, filthy lot [whose] only standard is the standard of the box-office." But Doherty claims that once Breen came to know these studio heads better, he denounced various anti-Semitic groups and spoke out against their words and actions.

Doherty based his flat assertion that "No antisemitism filtered into Hollywood" on the fact that the Code prohibited the portrayal of foreign nationalities as objects of derisive humor and/or scorn. But Hollywood hadn't carried out the Code's standard by presenting more realistic, complex Jews; "they," according to Doherty, simply vanished from American movies. That in itself was an accommodation to anti-Semitism.

It also doesn't seem to have occurred to Doherty that Breen, no fool, might have suppressed his open anti-Semitism once he realized that he was going to be working for some time in an industry with many Jewish executives and artists.

In any case, Ben Urwand's *The Collaboration: Hollywood's Pact with Hitler* (2013) presents a deeper, more credible reading of this "accommodation." Beginning with Hitler's banning of *All Quiet on the Western Front (1930)* in Germany, the major Hollywood studios (excepting Warner Bros.), fearful of losing the lucrative German market, agreed to collaborate with the Nazis by meeting their demands.

Urwand writes that the Hays Office, with Breen at the helm and together with the Nazi regime, blocked the production of *The Mad Dog in Europe*, an honest depiction of life in Germany under Hitler. This action established the grounds of the relationship between Hollywood and fascist Germany for the rest of the 1930s—i.e., Hollywood would not portray the Nazis' treatment of the Jews. During this time, the Hitler regime had final approval on more than 400 American films.

The first American anti-Nazi film was Frank Borzage's *Mortal Storm*, released in 1940, which still didn't directly reference anti-Semitic persecution, and it was not until Andre de Toth's *None Shall Escape* (1944) that the Nazis' treatment of the Jews was treated in an American movie.

Neither author has considered the fact that the US and Nazi Germany shared interests deeper than the market for American movies. As the WSWS wrote in its December 2013 review of Urwand's book, the imperialist powers in Europe and the US were "generally sympathetic toward Hitler's brutal repression of left-wing parties and all independent workers' organizations." These powers also hoped that Germany would destroy the Soviet Union.

Be that as it may, Doherty's biography is valuable reading for its detailed record of how various ideological forces in early-to-mid-twentieth century America informed Joseph Breen's development into the most "successful" censor of Hollywood movies. In this time of promoting censorship as a necessary weapon against "evil forces," knowing this history is more vital than ever.