

---

# Morality and the Movies Week 3.

## Andrew Graves

### Early Hollywood

- In 1915, the Supreme Court ruled that motion pictures were not covered by the First Amendment, cities began to pass ordinances banning the public exhibition of "immoral" films, and the studios feared that state or federal regulations were not far off.
- This was followed in the 1920s by a series of public scandals

### 1922

- The formation of Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America
- Will Hays was recruited by the organization to act as president so that the Hollywood system could be seen to be 'cleaning up its act'
- At first Hays came up with what he dubbed 'the formula' – a set of recommendations which the studios should adhere to

### 1929

- Martin Quigley, editor of the Motion Picture Herald and Jesuit priest Daniel A. Lord created a Code of standards (which Hays approved of) and submitted to the studios
- After some revisions, the Code was accepted by the studios in an attempt to head off direct government intervention

### The Production Code

- Was also known as the 'Hays Code'
- The Code was divided into two parts. The first was a set of "general principles" that mostly concerned morality. The second was a set of "particular applications", an exacting list of items that could not be depicted.
- From March 31, 1930, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America formally pledged to abide by the production code
- However, compliance with the Code was a verbal agreement and essentially it became difficult to maintain or enforce

"That four-year interval marks a fascinating and anomalous passage in American motion picture history: the so-called pre-Code era, when censorship was lax and Hollywood made the most of it. Unlike all studio system feature films released after July 1934, pre-Code Hollywood did not adhere to the strict regulations on matters of sex, vice, violence and moral meaning...the Code commandments were violated with impunity and inventiveness in a series of wildly eccentric films..."

**Doherty, T (1999) *Pre-Code Hollywood***

### The Pre-Code Era - 1930-1934

"...more unbridled, salacious, subversive, and just plain bizarre than what came afterwards, they look like Hollywood cinema but the moral terrain is so off-kilter they seem imported from a parallel universe."

**Doherty, T (1999) *Pre-Code Hollywood***

---

### Pre-Code Contexts

- The Great Depression
- The nation was plunged into a crippling economic crisis
- Commercial radio came to prominence – threatening to erode the market further
- Sound technology costs were skyrocketing
- Revenues were going down

### Male Homosexuality in the pre-Code era

“The screen homosexual was called the nance, the poof, the fairy or the queer. He was the flouncing twit, the supporting character whose mere presence sparked a snicker. Associated with with the upper ranks of the British class system and the backstage worlds of theatre and high fashion, the mincing gestures and perfumed wardrobe of the nance had been the staples of vaudeville sketches, legitimate theatre, and the silent screen in the 1920s.”

**Doherty, T (1999) *Pre-Code Hollywood***

### James Whale (1889-1957)

- Born in Dudley, Worcestershire
- Working class
- Homosexual

### The Frankenstein Monster

“Untold millions had been left with the feeling that modern life – and death – was nothing but an anonymous, crushing assembly line...Whale’s film depicted a monster squarely in the grip of this confusion, a pathetic figure caught, as it were, between humanism and mechanism.”

**David J Skal**

### The Bride of Frankenstein (1935)

- Was originally going to be ‘The Return of Frankenstein’
- Whale had no interest in directing it
- When he realised they weren’t going to let him make the film he wanted, he agreed
- The studio wanted another Frankenstein – what he gave them was an outrageously subversive black comedy
- Much more lavish production
- Bigger budget
- Larger in scale
- A monster that speaks
- Music
- Placed together the pair resembled a horribly twisted parody of the wedding ceremony – Karloff the brutish, clueless husband, Lanchester the unwilling wife.
- Needless to say, things don’t go well for the unhappy couple, when the monster’s bride rejects the idea of marriage in an actual hissy fit, he decides to pull the plug on the whole affair, blowing apart himself, his bride, the castle and Pretorius in a less the acrimonious divorce.

---

### Mae West

- Mary Jane West was born in Brooklyn in 1893
- Daughter to German immigrants
- She made her entertainment debut aged five at a church social
- From seven she began regularly entering talent contests
- She experimented with various personas including a male impersonator
- She made her Broadway debut in 1911 in a revue called *La Broadway*
- She also appeared in *Vera Violetta* and *A Winsome Widow*
- In 1926 she wrote, produced, directed and starred in 'Sex' her first Broadway play
- The show was panned by conservative critics but proved very popular
- It didn't go down to well with civil officials and received a mountain of complaints from religious groups
- The theatre was raided and West was arrested and later charged for 'corrupting the morals of youth'
- She was jailed for ten days and was released after eight
- West treated it as a publicity stunt and the press lapped it up
- Her next play was *The Drag* - about homosexuality and cross dressing
- The show played in some out of town theatres but was banned from being allowed to play in Broadway
- She was an early supporter of the Women's Liberation Movement and from the 1920s had been an advocate of gay rights
- She produced several more plays
- After her play, *Diamond Lil* (1928) became a Broadway hit, Hollywood came knocking
- She was almost 40 when she was offered a motion picture contract
- She had what some would describe as 'matronly like' figure – a stark contrast to the fashionable 'flapper' image
- *'She was the Big Ben of hourglass figures'* – Truman Capote

*'...West's larger than life character is firmly entrenched in the realms of legend. Her imitators make frequent appearances in a variety of incarnations that both project and pantomime sex, as was her trademark. Celebrities have mimicked Mae West's affected swagger, curvaceous figure figure and famously suggestive quips...Never before did a woman act so brazenly carnal and sexually aggressive in theatre and on screen – and become a star for it.'*

**Dominique Mainon and James Ursini**

### Joseph Breen (1888-1965)

- Was recruited by Hays to head up the Production Code Administration (PCA)
- Unlike earlier attempts at censorship, decisions by the PCA became binding
- No picture could be shown without the PCA stamp of approval
- Producers attempting to do this could be fined \$25,000

---

### Mae West and The Production Code

- The Hays office took the precaution of stationing a watchdog at the studio to oversee production
- Billboards were picketed by the Legion of Decency
- In 1938 Hays (alongside right wing publisher, William Randolph Hearst) arranged the publication of a list of stars considered to be 'box office poison'
- This was a 'legal' way of ridding Hollywood of difficult actors and writers who supported the trade unions' campaign during the depression

*'But Mae West's inclusion in this fabricated blacklist was solely due to the embarrassment her sexuality caused the American censor.'* - **Tom Dewe Mathew**

- The profits from *She Done Him Wrong* had saved Paramount from bankruptcy in 1933
- Despite this she was dropped by the studio
- Despite making a few more films for Columbia and Universal, her persona was unsuited to the new restrictions. She retired from the cinema in 1943.

*'Because of her outrageous disregard for the censor Mae West had been hounded off the screen; and her sisters in celluloid sexuality were therefore in no position to ignore the more petty restrictions which were now being imposed upon them by the Hays Office. Marlene Dietrich's name featured on Hay's bogus blacklist and Paramount also refused to renew her contract in the late 30s. Even Garbo, the Queen of MGM was affected.'*

**Tom Dewe Mathews**

*'The disruptive and comically "unruly" woman has a long history, in various specific contexts appearing as a central figure in the repertoire of carnival in medieval and early modern Europe and in burlesque and music hall traditions on which early film drew as one of its major sources. A tradition of strongly assertive and disruptive female performers has continued in film, from Mae West to Whoopi Goldberg, although not in anything like the numbers of their male counterparts.'*

**Geoff King**

*'West is limited to the single narrative of a woman's life: of her relation to men. West's persona bursts out of the narrative of the whore with a heart of gold, which is the only narrative that would make her acceptable to a mainstream audience. And yet, that narrative confines her to a single note performance.'*

**Katherine Rowe**