ABSTRACT

CREATIVE PROJECT: The Obscene Moving Image: An Analysis of Censored Film Content by the Ohio Board of Film Censorship, 1913-1955

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From 1913 to 1955 Ohio was one of seven states to have a government board of film censorship. In order for a film to be shown in the state of Ohio, distributors were required to submit the film to the Board and pay a fee (per reel). The Board would watch the film and determine whether it was: approved, approved with eliminations (to be removed before the film could be shown), or rejected. This digital project analyzes the collected eliminations (gathered on forms called bulletins) of films categorized as “approved with eliminations,” to determine the major topics of censorship for the Board and trace those topics over the Board’s forty-year period. These topics are looked at in the historical and cultural context of early twentieth century United States and the development of the film industry. The second aspect of this analysis is a series of case studies of films that were censored by the Board: Shanghaied (Chaplin, 1915), The Outlaw (Hughes, 1943), and M (Losey, 1951). These case studies provide an opportunity to examine the films in real time through the lens of the Board’s decisions, allowing for a unique perspective rarely found in historical research. This is only possible because it is a digital project, where the film is embedded into the page where it can be watched while
reading the eliminations/reasons for rejection. At the outset, this intent of this project was to
examine the records of the Ohio Board of Film Censorship to determine the major topics.
Analyzing a large data set, the major topics were identified: sexuality, violence, crime, and
alcohol. Overall, this project illustrates that the censorship of film evolved over time in
response to its historical context and the development of the industry. While this project
provides a close case study of one of the major government boards for censorship, through the
case studies section this project also provides a meaningful opportunity to see the issue from
the perspective of the censors and their goal of using films as a tool of moral and social
advancement.