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IRISH
FILM
CEN
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A CULTURAL
JOURNEY FROM
SILENT CINEMA
TO INTERNET
PORNOGRAPHY



IRISH FILM CENSORSHIP: A Cultural Journey from Silent Cinema to Internet Pornography

'Indecent, obscene or blasphemous..or subversive of public morality'

National film censorship began in Ireland with the introduction of the 1923 Censorship of Films Act. According to the terms of the act, films considered to be 'indecent, obscene or blasphemous, ' or 'contrary to..or subversive of public morality' were to be banned or cut.

With more than 50,000 film censorship decisions to date, about 2,500 theatrical films have been banned while about 11,000 have been cut, but this draconian treatment was largely carried out prior to 1965. If this was partly as a result of a conservative and hysterical approach to cinema, it was also due to the fact that all films, with rare exceptions were certified for general viewing, or in other words, for the youngest child. It is hardly surprising then that so few films made it passed the censors unscathed.

Since the mid-1960s Irish film censorship has increasingly become more liberal with films rated age-appropriate, cutting having virtually stopped with the eighth Film Censor, Sheamus Smith (1987-2003), and rejects reduced to a trickle.

Today, there is little difference between what Irish audiences view and those elsewhere, except in relation to adult pornography which, in the main, remains taboo with about 3,000 such video titles prohibited.

'I take the Ten Commandments as my Code.'

James Montgomery (1923-1940)

During the hey-day of Irish film censorship, the Official Film Censors, all men, and of which there is only ever one, and supported by the various nine-person Appeal Boards (which always have included at least one Catholic priest and a Protestant minister), cut a swathe through commercial cinema.

'I consider that sexational pictures of which [the 1924 film Name the Man] is typical should not be imported for general exhibition in Saorstát Éireann.'

James Montgomery, 1924

Taking the lead from the first Film Censor, James Montgomery, who declared that he acted as a 'moral sieve', and used the ten commandments as his guide, the Act continued to be interpreted until the mid-1960s in a strict 'grandmotherly' way. As a result, not allowed in Irish cinemas was anything which negatively impacted on religion or was contrary to statute law as well as Catholic morality. Thus forbidden was a long list of themes which affected films across all categories and genres, from exploitation and B-movies to Hollywood blockbusters and the best of European and Art Cinema.

'Complaints are pouring in from all parts of this State regarding kisses shown on the screen that would not be attempted even on the stage. As a matter of fact a prolonged kiss on the stage provokes ridicule, but the cinema, to the accompaniment of the most sensuous music, lavishes miles of celluloid on this unsanitary salute.'

James Montgomery, 1928

Sex

No explicit references to or representations of, comic or otherwise, of sex, eroticism and intimacy were permitted. This ranged from married couples enjoying one another, even relatively tame kissing, to extra- and pre-marital affairs, incestuous or inter-generational relations, miscegenation, homosexuality, bi-sexuality and group or other sexual activities, particularly prostitutes 'with or without a heart of gold'.

Divorce

Divorce, as it was deemed to be against God's law, and was prohibited under constitutional law, was another taboo. Indeed, Richard Hayes, the second Censor, demanded the title of the American romantic comedy starring Dick Powell and Joan Blondell (who were actually married in real life at the time) 'I Want a Divorce' changed to the moralizing 'The Tragedy of Divorce', even though the couple do not want a separation.

Birth Control

'I could easily reject it [Four Frightened People - Cecil B DeMille, 1934] for the "comic" relief of the sexy lady urging birth control in the jungle.'

James Montgomery, 1934

All references to birth control were cut from films including *Gone with the Wind* (even when featured only on advertisements for condoms within the background of a film's scene such as in 1979 from *Chicana* and in 1981 from the short *Test Rider*), abortion, miscarriages, and childbirth were invariably cut while pregnancy was treated with caution.

Montgomery even joked that a mid-wife would be better suited to the job! As he said of Michael Curtiz's, 1939 *Four Wives*: 'It bulges with babies and is better fitted for the Rotunda than for this office. It will dispel the cabbage myth from the child mind, and bring a blush to the cheek of the unmarried young girl sitting and holding hands with her embarrassed boyfriend in the darkest part of the cinema'.

'Reel one of Father O'Flynn (Wilfred Noy, 1935,GB) might be called "Stage Irish", but the girl dancing on the village green shows more leg than I've seen on any village green in Ireland. Better amputate them.'

James Montgomery

Dancing

Another 'favourite' of these earlier Censors was 'lascivious dancing' of which there was 'an appalling spate' due to the popularity of the musical genre. Writing about *The Trumpet Blows* (Stephen Roberts, 1934), which Montgomery found to be 'dirty sexy trash' he stated that 'If I had my way I certainly would reject any film which shows the Rumba dance.'

Of course, the hula and can-can were equally offensive for the Censor. It was not just the actual dancing, but the fact that they were an excuse to feature erotic displays of female nudity or 'semi-nudity'. Therefore, nightclub chorus lines, often called 'ballet,' or beauty contests were rigorously trimmed even though with regard to the latter, similar pageants and line-outs took place within Irish culture, including on the stage of Dublin's Theatre Royal.

'I have had much trouble in the past, particularly from Headmistresses of girls' schools regarding the antics of Elvis Presley with his most suggestive abdominal dancing, etc.'

Liam O'Hora, 1958

Youth or generation-gap cinema, which began to multiply in the 1950s, the era in which is also marked by an increase in adult cinema, both in terms of sexually explicit content and issues, were a source of difficulty for the censors. Films featuring the more tame Cliff Richard were no less the focus of the Censor's scissors.

Horror

Michael Powell's 1960 Peeping Tom 'is an amalgam of sex, sadism and horror, and has not been shown to children anywhere in the world. I do not feel that children should see it here.'

Liam O'Hora, 1960

This milestone film, released the same year as Alfred Hitchcock's Psycho, which was also radically cut, was only the beginning of a new level of explicitness in horror which as a genre showed up, more than another, the limitations of general certificate policy.

Language

Likewise prohibited have been a number of forbidden words, though as elsewhere in the history of all film censorship, this has mutated and changed according to the standards of the day.

If the line-up of offensive phrases might seem obvious, it has also included in the early years the word virgin, and, in the 1940's, 'jeepers creepers' and its variants, all understood as substitutes for Jesus Christ.

Even after the relative loosening of the censorship process, initiated by the 1965 Appeal Board chaired by Judge Conor Maguire, Peter Yates' 1973 film The Friends of Eddie Coyle was banned on the basis that 'the use of four-letter words and the blasphemous use of "Jesus" and "Jesus Christ" occurs far too frequently, I would require 46 of the situations to be cut and this figure represents about two-thirds of the situations where objectionable language arises.' (Dermot Breen, 1974)

Religion

'It is regrettable that it [Audrey Rose] deals with the belief in the transmigration of the soul and for this reason must be rejected ... Heresy may be a strong word to use but it sums up the reason for rejection.'

Dermot Breen, 1977

References to religion by way of profanities was not the only difficulty the Censors experienced. All representations impacting on religion were treated with acute sensitivity. In the first instance all images of the materialization of Christ were suppressed, as were representations of sacraments, including the Pope cut from a newsreel in 1937 because of his elevation of the monstrance.

Any fictional or real religious theme shown in a negative light was also deemed inappropriate and cut. These included lapsed or defrocked clerics, particularly when a priest or ex-priest is seen in any intimate relation with a woman, even if such a relationship precedes a priest's vocation, as in Alfred Hitchcock's I Confess (1953), where it was curtailed.

Perhaps, more extraordinary is the cutting of the priest in *Angels with Dirty Faces* (Michael Curtiz, 1938), when he tells the Dead End Kids that gangster James Cagney died yellow: 'No motive however good can excuse a lie. So, the priest's lie must come out.'

Violence

Deputy Censor Gabriel Fallon felt he had no option but to reject *The Wild Bunch* because of its 'orgies of brutality' and 'its sadistic violence.'

If issues around sexual morality have been fore-grounded within the history of Irish film censorship, such that the human body, even in its most innocent state of revealing or undress, has been curtailed, murder and violence have been treated more leniently. Nevertheless, if the violence extended beyond the basic narrative demand, it too has been cut. Visceral violence has therefore been most problematic in horror and the new cinema of spectacle, such as in *The Wild Bunch*, which was later passed with cuts by the Appeal Board.

Of course, gratuitous violence dominated in the video nasties' debate from the 1980s, and continues to be an issue. While Richard Brooks' 1977 *Looking for Mr Goodbar* was banned as 'the most violent film I have yet seen.' (Dermot Breen, 1978), likewise Sheamus Smith banned *Natural Born Killers* because of its 'wall to wall violence'.. 'which is made light of' and 'in the context of [IRA violence], and the fact that we were living in a violent society in Ireland.' He also banned the controversial French film, *Baise Moi*, because of 'acts of gross violence and cruelty towards humans'.

'It is not very clearly shown, but it certainly may be inferred [in Odette] that Odette is living in adultery with the gambler. I don't want to emasculate the story, but I fancy if it were suggested that she is merely a decoy and not the mistress of the gambler that the story would be just as effective.'

James Montgomery, 1928

Re-making, not Censoring

Prior to the 1980s, when the practice of cutting largely became redundant, the Censors' interventions very often were extensive such that their 're-editing' meant a radical overhaul of the film, something that was much easier to do in the silent era. In some instances the Censor took the opportunity to actually re-make the narrative so that, for example, the mistress might 'become' the wife while the real wife is excised, thus regularizing an 'immoral' and, in Irish law, illegal relationship.

Likewise, the Censor cut *Casablanca* so as to deny the romantic relationship of married Ilsa and Rick. That she believes herself to be a widow when she and Rick fall in love in Paris was, according to the Censor, irrelevant, and this, as well as their continuing love, he considered impossible in an Irish context as it was adultery. *Casablanca* (1942) initially had been banned in Ireland due to neutrality restrictions during the Second World War when almost all references to war were cut from both fiction films and newsreels.

Inconsistency

Clearly, given that the Censorship of Films Act, 1923, which governs censorship, contains relatively vague criteria, open to subjective and varied interpretation, the resultant taboos, which are in part related to what is considered appropriate at any given time, has meant that the history of censorship has been inconsistent, such that one Censor might ban a film which, on appeal, may be passed.

Though there are many such examples of the divergence between the Official Film Censor and the Appeal Board in the 1960s, including banned films passed uncut on appeal, a slate as the 1980s, Monty Python's *Life of Brian* (1979), was banned by Frank Hall in 1980, but passed uncut, albeit with an over-18 limitation, by Sheamus Smith in 1987 under the seven year rule by which a film may be resubmitted for certification.

Official Film Censors: A Role Call, from moral guardians to classifiers.

James Montgomery (1923-1940), Dr. Richard Hayes (1940-1954) and Dr. Martin Brennan (1954-1956) set the blueprint for a strict moral censorship.

Liam O'Hora (1956-1964) and Dr. Christopher Macken (1964-1972) held a transitional position. While they attempted to adhere to the policies of their predecessors, they found themselves increasingly out of step with Irish culture and the more adult and daring cinema.

Dermot Breen (1972-1978) and Frank Hall (1978-1986) were the first Censors to have worked in film or related areas and could be loosely regarded as (partly) progressive.

Sheamus Smith (1986-2003) and John Kelleher (2003 to present). The label of liberal is more suited, as they have moved more completely away from a repressive censorship towards classifying on an age-related basis and in their reluctance to cut or ban a film.

'I think that a film is a director's work and he is the only one really entitled to cut it.'

Sheamus Smith

A New Approach

The current censorship regime is characterized by a greater openness and flexibility, as well as approaching the public as consumers. This is most apparent in this very website which seeks to engage with the public in a way unique within the history of Irish censorship. Morality, it would seem, is more inclusive when not driven by a strict Catholic and nationalist vision and when films are not regarded as invidious forms of alien cultural colonization.

An A to Z of selected films that were banned or cut

Animal Crackers
Brief Encounter
Cat on A Hot Tin Roof
Devils, The
Everything You Wanted to
Know About Sex, but Were Afraid to Ask
Freaks
Graduate, The
High Society
I'm Alright Jack
Jailhouse Rock
The King of Kings
Little Big Man
Masque of the Red Death, The
Natural Born Killers
On the Waterfront
Postman Always Rings Twice, The
Quiet Man, The
Rashomon
Singin' in the Rain
Texas Chainsaw Massacre, The
Ulysses
Viva Zapata
White Zombie
X The Unknown
A Yank in the RAF
Zee & Co.

An A to Z of selected directors whose films were banned or cut

Michelangelo Antonioni
Ingmar Bergman
John Cassavetes
Cecil B. DeMille
Blake Edwards
John Ford
Jean-Luc Godard
Alfred Hitchcock
Rex Ingram
Charles Jarrott
Elia Kazan
Sidney Lumet
Vincente Minnelli
Mike Nichols
Max Ophuls
Roman Polanski
Richard Quine
Roberto Rossellini
Douglas Sirk
Francois Truffaut
Edgar G. Ulmar
Luchino Visconti
Orson Welles
X-rated directors
Peter Yates
Fred Zinnemann

A Comprehensive History of the Subject

For the history and analysis of Irish film censorship, see Kevin Rockett's 'Irish Film Censorship: A Cultural Journey from Silent Cinema to Internet Pornography' (Dublin, Four Courts Press, October 2004).

This pioneering book, which explores over 1,500 representative film titles, based on primary research of the censors' actual reports, provides an invaluable and unique insight into Ireland's national psyche and changing cultural, ideological, and moral certainties. Along the way, it traces the growth and influence of the mediums of cinema, television, video and the internet within Irish society.

Similarly, it reveals that censorship is necessarily more than the sum of the cuts or bannings, which, though ostensibly made in the name of "decency", is a means through which to wage a cultural war of control, and ultimately through which a culture expresses itself.'