

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Great Plains Quarterly

Great Plains Studies, Center for

2009

Review of "Banned in Kansas: Motion Picture Censorship, 1915-1966," By Gerald R. Butters Jr.

Thomas Fox Averill
Washburn University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly>



Part of the [Other International and Area Studies Commons](#)

Averill, Thomas Fox, "Review of "Banned in Kansas: Motion Picture Censorship, 1915-1966," By Gerald R. Butters Jr." (2009). *Great Plains Quarterly*. 1150.

<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/greatplainsquarterly/1150>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Great Plains Studies, Center for at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Great Plains Quarterly by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

the legislature to review each film that might be shown in the state. The board could accept the film, remove scenes or titles (and, when pictures began to talk, objectionable language), or reject the film entirely—hence the title of Butters’s book.

In 1920, the Kansas Board of Review first published its official standards. These included the positive: a film should be wholesome, and should not ridicule any religious sect or race of people. But the “shall nots” quickly asserted themselves: no debasing of morals, no evil or suggestive dress, no depiction of infidelity in marriage, no nudity, no alcohol, no settings where people are drinking or gambling or “cigarette smoking.” In addition: no crime, violence, passionate love scenes, dance halls, white slavery, or seduction and betrayal of innocence.

Gerald Butters has meticulously researched the history of Kansas film censorship. He enhances his archival research with film advertising, letters to the editor, editorials, and newspaper coverage of the Board’s activities. He also recreates the regional and national climate. Kansas was not the only state, nor the first, to censor films. The film industry tried to self-censor, thus avoiding the problems created by censorship boards.

Film history is as complicated as the attempts to direct and censor movies, either by the industry itself or by Kansas. Movies were, and still are, big business. By 1910, a quarter of the American population saw a movie at least once a week. By 1920, film production was the fifth largest industry in the U.S. Then, as now, huge divides in politics, religion, artistic sensibility, region, and taste made uniform judgment and standards nearly impossible, whether for Kansas or the nation. After Prohibition, after two World Wars, as foreign films flooded the American market, as levels of education and financial security increased, as individual rights were strengthened in education, the workplace, and in other media—particularly publishing—censorship of films was narrowed to a single standard by the U.S. Supreme Court. A film would be judged as a whole, and only censored if “obscene”—meaning that “to the average

Banned in Kansas: Motion Picture Censorship, 1915-1966. By Gerald R. Butters Jr. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007. xvi + 348 pp. Photographs, notes, appendix, bibliography, index. \$44.95.

From 1915 to 1966, Kansas maintained an active film censorship board, empowered by

person, applying contemporary community standards, the dominant theme of the material taken as a whole appeals to prurient interest.”

By the mid-1960s, Kansas censors (historically they were women, and political appointees) viewed between three to four hundred films a year and rejected or censored fewer than ten. In 1966, Shawnee County District Court Judge Marion Beatty ruled the state statute that had created censorship to be invalid. By then, Kansans inside and outside the movie industry had tried for years to dismantle the Board of Review. In 1968, the Motion Picture Association of America adopted its rating system based on the age of the viewer. Kansans who had called all along for the protection of their children could act as their own censors.

Writing of a visit to the firehouse in Kansas City where the Board had its office, Butters imagines “the ‘tsk-tsk’ from a disgruntled female censor.” Such imagining belittles the social complexities of censorship and demonstrates problems with tone throughout the book: while most often showing real insight, Butters sometimes playfully dismisses the ardent and now-quaint fight against the prolonged kiss, or the phrase, “By God!” The story of censorship can seem repetitious—the excision of yet another curse word, bare breast, or bottle of alcohol. Moreover, the book might have sought more balance between fact and analysis and between the first twelve years of Kansas film censorship (over half the book) and the final thirty-eight.

Those quibbles aside, Butters has given back to the region an almost lost history. And though he is looking at film censorship, his subject suggests provocative social history. *Banned in Kansas* is significant to our understanding of the culture wars still being fought, whether in politics, public schools, or on the big screen.

THOMAS FOX AVERILL
Department of English
Washburn University