HOLLYWOOD’S CENSOR IS ALL THE WORLD
The Cinema Capital, in Marketing Its Films, Must Consider Foreign Sensibilities

THE row over the abandonment of the film version of “It Can’t Happen Here” has dramatized a situation which is now dominant in the motion-picture industry. As Hollywood is increasingly dependent on the world market for its profits, it has become subject to what is really a world censorship of the screen. At this moment the world censorship is more important to Hollywood and raises more difficult problems than the domestic censorship which was threatened during the “purge wave” of two years ago.

At home, as the recent hearings on the Neely bill outlawing blood and sex block booking showed, the moral state of the screen was regarded as so satisfactory that censorship proposals were dropped. Except for a minority, political regulation of the screen appears to be a remote issue within these borders.

Not so abroad. So closely are the wheels of international trade, politics, manipulation and influence enmeshed in foreign parts that American producers are as subject to the dictation of French, British and Italian censors as they would be if their headquarters were in Paris, London or Rome. Hollywood dare not make an important picture to which Turkey objects, nor can American audiences see a major film which is offensive to the Minister of Education and Propaganda in Germany.

Freedom of expression may be guaranteed in the American Constitution, but if the motion-picture business desires to sell its product abroad it has to wrap the guarantee up and buy it away in levandine.

The weapon of the foreign censor is simple and effective—if a picture does not suit him he can shut off the producer’s revenue by banning it or refusing to license it. Since the American market alone will not return a profit on a big picture, the producer cannot even make his film for home consumption if it is not approved abroad. When a European censor decrees, “This story conflicts with our economics, politics or national philosophy and will not be approved for exhibition,” Hollywood is forced to abandon the project.

What cannot be shown in Rome or Berlin can generally not be shown in Omaha or Detroit. There are those in Hollywood who resent this condition as much as do those outside. But there is nothing they can do about it. The foreign governments are within their rights.

The American producer’s plight can be illustrated by the case of one studio, which does a business of $35,000,000 a year throughout the world. Of this total, overseas rentals and short subjects which are not offered abroad account for $8,000,000. Of the remaining $25,000,000 one-half comes from sources outside the United States. First in the list of customers comes the British Empire: France is second, occupying the position formerly held by Germany; Central Europe is third, South America fourth, and Italy fifth.

With the exception of Britain, Hollywood might lose any one of these markets and still worry along. But the loss of one might precipitate the loss of others.

Should Turkey ban American films because it disliked “The Forty Days of Mau Mau,” and later Slav, China, Bolivia and Greece should feel insulted by other films, the beginning of the end of Hollywood’s influence might be in sight.

EXCEPT in rare instances, such as that of “It Can’t Happen Here,” it is not easy to tell what Hollywood would make if the foreign censors were lifted. It would still be under the self-imposed regulations for domestic consumption which were adopted in July, 1934, and which are now administered by Joseph I. Brown of the Hayes office. However, it has learned to operate comfortably under this code, and during the past twenty months complaints from American sources have been minor and isolated.

The foreign situation is more difficult to analyze, since a good deal more than moral purity is involved. What is certain is that Hollywood is conscious all the time of the possibility of rejection of properties that are being photographed at great expense, and these properties are being turned out with an attentive eye to other lands.

The fear of censorship has a positive rather than a negative effect. Hollywood has learned what it can make commercially and with least chance of interference. It knows, for example, that musicals, biographical and historical subjects have found favor abroad, provided they raise no current issues, while the talkative drawing-room dramas rarely sell well. England care little for Westerns, but they are immensely popular in nearly every other country. Action films are as a whole a substantial portion of the export trade. No other country can compete with our musicals, whose lavishness astounds foreign producers, but our humor, on the other hand, is often found to be a perishable commodity when taken across salt water.
The Hays letter which said, "We believe the story to be of so inflammatory a nature and so filled with dishonesty that the greatest possible care will save it from being repeated on all sides.

Mr. Mayer is also on the side of the angels when he says that the project was abandoned because of an excessive budget. Any big picture nowadays will cost $350,000 or more if it is banned in important countries abroad. Hollywood can make a $250,000 picture exclusively for the American market and expect to get its money back. But they would have to have cost $750,000 to make, with an additional $400,000 for exploitation and special bookings. And a big male role the producer could not have recouped this expenditure even if he could have barred the pictures, for obvious reasons, and could have caused his suppression in countries friendly to them. England, permitting no portrayal of political dimension, has banned it, with a probable loss right there of 25 per cent of the potential revenue from the film.

With France, Japan and several South American countries sure to follow suit, Metro could have cost a long of approximately $500,000. By the time it would have earned the eminence of several powers and jeopardized its own prestige, the picture will have cost $750,000. It took so profound a thinking on the part of either Mr. Hays or Mr. Mayer to make the decision to be carrying idealism and adherence to a principle too far. The film industry is a business, not a crusade.

These issues are not always as clear as they were in the case of "The Informer." Foreign censorship assumes many forms and are administered by many countries. In some of these cases, these bureaus in different countries are often very similar. The Spanish censor, "Rumbia" at the request of Cuba, France back from Turkey in protesting "Wuthering Heights," sided China in having cuta mads in "Pa Mánch." Censorship debates are amusing and interesting. Quebec will not allow the word "divorce" to be uttered in advertisements or in the title of banned words. The British censor has declared "Blaze of Glory" until the title was changed, since no reference to the Deity is permitted. Every country has its "Green Pastures" will be rejected in its order. The Federal cinema in "The Trial of the Lonesome Pine" was slashed by the minister consulted the Lobby. It is a matter of friendly nation may be used. Because of its substantial contrubution to the screen, England is one of Hollywood's greatest problems. Italy is particularly thin-skinned. An Italian writer named Porcella laughed in "Dinky," an innocuous little film starring Jackie Cooper, by his enthusiasm for spaghetti and his misunderstanding of a football game, and, although the title was sympathetic, the characterization was regarded as an insult to Italian national pride. Learning this, Metro deleted a comedy scene about two Italian men fighting over a knife. Paramount reshot a portion of "Give Us This Night" because Italian representatives said their national dignity had been offended when an Italian physician received a black eye.

A Greek professional men's society in Chicago protests that Metro - Hays office that they were protesting to their government be deleted. Also scenes of a gun made by a British firm and scenes of a British priest in a church atonuation: "Delete all comments about religion and the thoughts of their remarks about religion.

It is not easy to tell whether politics or economics takes the lead in foreign censorship of American films. Hollywood producers do not intend to permit themselves or their ideals to be derided or conflicted with. It is just that the countries which do not have dictators, may, for political reasons, bar a picture which would hurt their neighbors' feelings.

At the same time imported films do not always escape. "The Informer" in Hollywood doesn't get a chance to make any money for which there is no tangible return. Other nations are bound to be jealous of the huge salaries and huge profits of which they read in every Hollywood journal. Alexander Korda has encouraged native production and give their own directors, actors and business methods an Italian and French actually subsidize domestic film concerns the audiences, remain unimpressed with American films, charging a double admission, will do twice as well in France and twice as well in Italy. The whole process shows the picture, with showing a native picture.

In Spain all American receipts have been doubled since the war and two of the contingent law that will stimulate Spanish production. A Barcelona family has just made a very enterprising picture if protected against Hollywood. Dreidle steps are being taken in England to bolster up the foreign American films and encourage its own. Hollywood charges that the Gaumont company, which produces "Alice Adams" was ruthlessly shelled as a part of the campaign. Almost any picture which is a hit with American producers who will make pictures in foreign countries, which have announced England's first $1,000,000 picture and the British are competing with Hollywood on salaries.

One reason, of course, agitation is Hollywood's stand of life in other lands. One of the most popular songs in France is a raucous party with their post cards and theatres, made a huge hit and was well received for export and it was promptly banned from the country. Another example which paints the picture of a romance between a high political figure and a gypsy girl. His European representative wrote him, "The picture is a picture of offensive to Central Europe as would be a film in the United States, no matter how sympathetic Secretary of State consenting with a veto of another race and color.

As to the future, Hollywood feels that the conflict abroad will continue for some time to dominate the world market. Once any nation masters the business within its own borders, that nation will adopt a more lenient attitude toward America will contribute to the international economic competition of potential will be to take the place of artificial restrictions and regulations of all kinds. The future is not has been done. Hollywood believes, civilization is the basis of continued friction that more than the usual number of fragments that are afraid of our ideas, as revealed in films, but they are far more afraid, and with good reason, that they will take root out of the mouths of their own film manufacturers.