

**Silver Screen:
How Films Shape Public Perception of Financial Regulation
In the 20th and 21st Centuries**

By Loren E. Miller

Since the invention of the nickelodeon, motion pictures have been an important part of American popular culture. Films ushered Americans into a new era of modernity, and helped create a national community. David Sklar argues: “For the first half of the twentieth century...movies were the most popular and influential medium of culture in the United States. They were the first of the modern mass media, and they rose to the surface of cultural consciousness from the bottom up.”¹ Scholars argue that movies both dictate and reflect culture. Additionally, they can be a means of controlling and empowering people. Movies have the power to change conventional values, as well as create them.

While scholarship continues to discuss the historical affects of films on the American public, there is little exploration of the portrayal of American financial markets in motion pictures. Financial markets are a large part of the American economy and culture. Moreover, movies have depicted financial markets, misdeeds, and regulation since the invention of silent film. By studying the various ways American movies have shown the image of the markets, nature of financial misdeeds, and the role of regulation over the past century, people can begin to consider how film may have reflected and shaped public perception of financial regulation.

This research has been organized chronologically in order to better reveal changing themes and patterns in films on financial regulation. The earliest silent films, created during the 1910s, depicted financial misdeeds as stock speculation and manipulation, as well as embezzlement. These misdeeds support an image of the markets as somewhat volatile. Characters easily lost and gained money with the changing markets. However, there is no real institutional punishment for financial misdeeds. Characters are punished by fate and misfortune, but there are few government repercussions. These plots reflect the lack of governmental financial regulation at the time.

During the 1920s, many of the same types of misdeeds are depicted in films; however the reasons behind the crimes and the punishments shift. Characters often have good intentions and noble reasons for committing misdeeds, such as helping an impoverished family member. These characters are often redeemed in the end of the film, perhaps because of the good intent behind their actions.

The 1930s is by far the decade with the largest number of films focusing on financial regulation. The increase in movies on this topic provides insight into the historical moment; the country faced the Great Depression after the stock market crash of 1929, and at the same time film technology grew. The motion pictures of the 1930s reflect the country’s preoccupation with the stock market crash, and the influence

¹ Robert Sklar, *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 3.

money can have on people. Many movies in 1930s include crimes such as embezzlement. There are also a fair number of films that survey past financial panics. During the 1930's, characters that perform these misdeeds are subject to governmental punishments instead of moral ones. For example, *The Gorilla* mentions an SEC agent investigating a financial crime.

The films of the 1940s maintained an emphasis on past financial crimes like the 1930s, but tend to focus on the Old West. Films from this period do not discuss the current world happenings in the world, but rather gold, oil, stagecoaches, and cowboys. Perhaps this emphasis provided a type of escapism from the grim events of World War II.

This theme continues into the 1950s, when illegal betting also becomes an area of focus. Characters stand up for what they believe is right, and, even if they end up wrongly accused of a crime, they are often cleared in the end.

The 1960s and 1970s were periods with few films focusing on financial regulation, perhaps because this was a time of wealth and strong markets. In the 1980s, films again began to discuss financial regulation, but these films tend to be comedies, reflecting a view that financial regulation was not a serious issue.

This was followed by a series of much more serious movies about regulation in the 1990s. This decade presents the topic as a source of serious problems in the country. The most recent films tend to focus on the financial crisis of the 2000s. Many of the movies show why the crisis started, whom it affected, and how people dealt with it. These films tend to have a negative depiction of corporations, showing how they hurt decent people.

These are just some brief reflections on this comprehensive list of films on financial regulation. There is still a much larger need for historians to synthesize how these films reflect or shape the public views of financial regulation throughout the past century. Considering that movies both reveal and shape how people see the world, examining how films on financial regulation have changed over time may help uncover larger public perceptions of the American financial system. I hope that this essay serves a starting point for a deeper inquiry into this topic.

Bibliography

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