Screen Cleaning: Moral Knowledge and the Politics of Cinema Censorship

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation asks how the structure of moral authority and media viewership in America has changed over the course of the 20th century. In order to address this question, I examine the ways in which American films are, and have been, labeled inappropriate or appropriate for public viewership. I ask how censorship, regulation and rating systems work to create and manage moral ambiguity, and what types of ramifications moral ambiguity is thought to have on viewers. I also address the types of problems associated with American cinema over time, and propose several analytical dimensions to capture and unpack the processes of censoring cinema. This framework is built on the notions of filth and moral ambiguity, moral repercussion, a process of responsibilization, and the telos for cinema, all of which influences how an organization interacts with movies and morality. In lapses of symmetry between on- and off-screen worlds, moral ambiguity arises in ways that responsibilize either content controllers or audiences themselves. I show the links between these articulations and how the moral repercussions of exposure to cinema are defined. I also argue that where in the past moral ambiguity was commonly perceived as a dangerous aspect of cinema, especially by censors and Hollywood film production regulators, contemporary movie raters present a film's moral ambiguity as a resource to the viewer. Moral ambiguity, if probed the right way, can lead to greater awareness of one's moral boundaries, enabling viewers to effectively censor their viewership practices themselves.

Greater responsibility of the viewer is also linked with more transparency and less rigid definitions of filth, moral repercussion, and the overall purpose of media consumption.

Censoring cinema was a way in which state censors attempted to shape a "good" civil society, but the notion of how such a society might be achieved through media shifted over the 20th century. By examining the work of Hollywood's Production Code Authority, New York State censors, pioneering sociologists and educators of the 1930s, the Film Estimate Board of National Organization's monthly film classification decisions, and contemporary movie ratings at Common Sense Media, I develop several sub-arguments that support the larger argument that moral ambiguity has become a resource as opposed to a danger. In doing so, I expose the connections between the efforts of earlier censors and industry regulators to contemporary constructions of moral authenticity in movie reviews, and highlight in particular the responsibilization of parental audiences. To date, parents are charged not only with monitoring what their children watch, but also with instilling critical viewing skills among their children. This contrasts with previous content control techniques, wherein parents were responsibilized to make decisions for their children but were not expected to foster any specific values or skills in them, and earlier techniques, wherein parents were not responsibilized at all. I end by noting that the contemporary approach to pollution management relies on two conflicting discourses, which have influenced strategies to managing media morality throughout the 20th century. The first focuses on media research and its alleged effects on social behavior, the second on free and intelligent choices by children consumers themselves – but as this dissertation also

exemplifies, both registers have echoes in earlier sites and examples of cinematic censorship and efforts to clean the screen.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Writing a dissertation is no solitary feat, as most readers of this document are likely well aware. My advisor, committee members, and mentors have provided me with a wealth of intellectual stimulation, encouragement, and research and writing tips. This proved invaluable for continuing to work on the dissertation, even when I could not make heads or tails of it. My parents, close friends, and colleagues in graduate school have been another fountain of encouragement and motivation. I am grateful for, and thankful to, all.

DEDICATION

For my parents, and their parents.

1.1) Approaches to censoring movies in a democratic society

It is well known that media wields a large amount of influence in establishing the societal

moral boundaries. Yet since the dawn of cinema, movies have experienced some form of

censorship. How are the movies censored, especially in a democratic society, and who has

the moral authority to decide what is viewable for whom? Moreover, how, as the American

cinema industry and its observers shifted from an era of censoring films to an era of rating

films, has the role of the viewer changed? Underlying the discussions offered in this

dissertation are larger questions, about the place of reality in narratives, and media-based

narratives in particular. What expectations for a correspondence between inner and outer,

or on-screen and off-screen life, are harbored by those in positions of persuasion, power,

and ability to shape the movies that are produced, distributed, and successfully screened

for audiences?

In addressing these questions across the 20ᵗʰ century and into the present, I will pay

specific attention to the role of the parent and their increasing responsibilities in managing

the media viewing habits of their children. This role informs the specific entry points into

the socio-historical settings examined here. As the viewer became problematized in the

transition from censorship to ratings, responsibility became an ever-important duty

assigned to the role of viewing and consuming media. The transition from censorship to

ratings has been built on a well-developed argument for self-censorship. This dissertation

argues that, because no one can censor all, viewers have become increasingly charged with the responsibility to monitor their own viewing practices.

Examining the processes of censoring and rating films, I delineate the definitions of moral repercussions associated with viewing inappropriate films, and the assigning of responsibility to specific roles (paying special attention to the rise of parental responsibility), organizations, and industries for enforcing morally appropriate viewing behaviors. I also compare the ultimate aim of classifiers, censors, media raters and educators as they attempt to curtail or amplify a film's circulation and audience. These processes are essential to deeper understandings of how morality is ascribed to narratives and ambiguity, how certain audiences are matched to certain sorts of movies over others, and how the limits of what is permissible for mass consumption are debated and constructed. This dissertation examines how censors, classifiers, and others manage ambiguity. How are the moral decisions of censors and classifiers justified, or employed as essential explanations and defenses for other media control approaches, such as media raters?

I argue that classification systems, while creating clear distinctions between the permissible and the impermissible, also creates spaces of moral ambiguity between demarcated lines, and that moral ambiguity enables further claims for the work of other media control efforts, such as media raters. I examine the moral politics and knowledge of American cinema censorship, classification, and evaluation from the 1930s to the present. In the

case of media, and mainstream American movies in particular, moral ambiguity takes on qualities that transform it from being cast as a danger to society into being cast as a resource, a tool by which members of society can come to generate knowledge about their own moral boundaries. I maintain that the function of moral ambiguity is connected to larger issues, in particular the shift from a censorial approach to a ratings approach to cleaning the screen. In order to examine these transitions, I have constructed a set of analytic categories. These categories are filth (and moral ambiguity), moral repercussion, responsibility (and responsibilization, the process of rendering an actor, organization, or industry responsible), and telos. I will briefly outline them here, before offering a more detailed discussion of each category in section 1.3.

Filth, here implying moral ambiguity, is the overarching category that highlights how morality is read into filmic narratives. This category enables the various cases discussed here to speak to one another, and is the first in the analytic process of censoring, regulating, or rating a film. The category of moral repercussion can be understood as those effects, anticipated by censors, classifiers, raters, and educators involved in encoding movies with morality, on the viewing audience. These are competing conceptions of harmful impact of consuming cinematic filth. Responsibility (and responsibilization) refers to the assignment of moral duty to promote or enforce appropriate viewing habits. Content control organizations and actors identify such habits differently, assigning these duties to different parties. Telos accounts for the overall aim, goal, or outcome which organizations and actors are hoping to achieve in their practice. Through these four

categories, this dissertation is ultimately able to shed light on the differences between those organizations and actors that developed a beneficial telos of their work and approached cinema with a potentially desirable and instructive outcome, with those that operated with a harmful telos, wherein cinema is continually expected to injure its viewers. Such a framework enables a closer inspection of how pollution behaviors and beliefs interact with practiced classification schemes for various actors over time.

By focusing on the connection between ambiguity and classification, this dissertation also argues that techniques and modes of content management, and the evaluation of morality, construct different viewers with varying qualities, bolstering the appropriateness for certain sets of services. To this end I will demonstrate different modes of apprehending cinema, ranging from harmful to neutral to beneficial, and the ties between such modes and the concept of ambiguity, either as a danger or a resource. In the harmful mode of apprehending cinema, practiced by censors, viewers are conceived of as being in need of protection and shielding from both meretricious didacticism (such as films in which the methods of crime are argued to be evidenced), as well as offensive narratives (for example, those films in which faith in the justice system is thrown into question for the sake of comedy). Here the social values of protecting public health and order are embedded in the efforts of censors excising content deemed beyond the moral pale. Ambiguity in a film is conceived of as a societal threat, a danger to the movie-going public. In order to curb it, censors, regulators, and other industry influencers must maintain a strong and explicit control over the moral boundaries of media production.

In a beneficial approach, practiced by classifiers, media raters, and educators, the implication of values such as freedom of choice or individual rights to select what one views are embedded in attempts to classify and rate media. This results in the creation of the figures of the responsible parent who interests themselves in what their children are consuming, and the ambiguous young adult who has the potential to be molded into being a conscience young adult. In this way, civil society is not comprised as something to be protected, so much as something to be advanced by the proper use of cinema. Ambiguity has here transformed into a resource, rather than a danger. By meditating on ambiguity, parents and younger viewers can both arrive at a deeper awareness about their own moral boundaries, and stick to them as they continue to consume and experience their mediatized world.

There are shades of gray between these two states of ambiguity. Standing somewhere between ambiguity as a danger and ambiguity as a resource is a more neutral mode, practiced by scholars and media researchers. Here, the relationship between on- and off-screen life is problematized, observed, and analyzed, but with less obvious and specific localizations of moral repercussion and responsibility. While the focus on this conceptualization in this dissertation stands in the middle chapters, examining the mid-20th century and key moments of the transition from regulation to ratings, I do not wish to give the impression that history progresses along any neat, linear path. Rather, this is the range of attributes associated with ambiguity this research uncovered. This research asks how

various actors and organizations such as civic organizations, state censors, parent classifiers, film reviewers, media bloggers and communications scholars and educators have conceptualized and problematized cinematic content and narrative, the influence of media and image on viewers, and the proper role and sphere for cinema. How ambiguity in cinematic narratives is conceptualized, dealt with, and rebuilt is a prime analytic focus in the following cases and analysis.

The empirical sites examined in this dissertation will evidence that the methods and manners of controlling cinematic objects and their interpretation vary by venue. Chapter 2 presents the work of Hollywood censors, or regulators, who maintained the most immediate influence over Hollywood production and its narrative moral boundaries in the first half of the 20th century. Chapter 3 focuses on state censors at the New York State Motion Picture Division, who dealt with ambiguity by excising it, constructing viewers in need of protection and viewers in need of validation at the same time. Chapter 4 examines the findings of early communications scholars and sociologists who analyzed cinema in somewhat neutral tones, examining its relationship to viewers' behavior without offering quick and easy moral repercussions or obvious responsible parties. Chapter 5 highlights the work of film classifiers, who relied on a built-in allowance for classification disagreements, encouraging the parent to arrive at their own decisions about their children's viewing habits. Similarly, as chapter 6 will demonstrate, contemporary media raters position themselves as neutral information bearers, leaving decisions to both parents and to some extent children, while incorporating the findings of contemporary media

scholars and developmental psychologists into their reviews of films. Before discussing my methodological approach, empirical material, and specific chapter findings, I will offer a broad historical portrait over the last century of the film industry, and then more fully explicate my analytical framework.

1.2) Cleaning the screen over the 20th century and into the 21st

At the beginning of the 20th century, the popularity of nickelodeons, theaters where a five-cent entrance fee granted the public early access to early motion pictures, began to take off. Inexpensive access to the movies aided the fledgling industry located on the edge of the southern California desert in becoming the world's capital for motion pictures and entertainment by 1919. Throughout the roaring '20s, this new entertainment empire gave rise to early celebrity culture, as the face of the star and the name of the director quickly became household news. At the same time, a handful of production studios, along with their theater chains, began to dominate production, distribution, and exhibition of the movie industry.

In the 1930s, largely known as Hollywood's Golden Era, important technological advances in sound recording enabled recorded sound to accompany the movies. This development ushered in a new era of filmmaking, and created a dynamic, new type of viewership at the movies. Although the Depression of the 1930s did not leave Hollywood unscathed, the movies maintained their cultural pre-eminence in the lives of millions of Americans by churning out hundreds of films a year. The genre and tone of American film production

began to acquire new tones and variations, as the industry began to more closely monitor the morality of production in an effort to stave off repeated attempts to establish more legislative censorship offices and agencies around the country and at the federal level. Despite some turbulence, theater-attendance rates continued to rise, peaking in 1946, two years after the end of WWII. Hollywood, now available with sound and increasingly available in color, seemed unstoppable were it not for the meteoric rise of television ownership and viewership in the post-WWII era.

The convenience and comfort of television drastically affected the revenues and profit the industry had, for the past decades of its existence, been accustomed to reaping. In order to differentiate their products from the ones offered in the comfort of one's own living room, Hollywood studios began rethinking the previous, one-size-fits-all approach to making and marketing films, opting for smaller audience segments instead. In addition to the segmented audience, the industry also began exhibiting films in multiplexes, allowing families of multiple ages to go to the movies and see different films on different screens at the same. In order to continue drawing in the attention of the burgeoning youth and the much sought after teenage market, major studios took advantage of developments in photography and began shooting off-set and on-location, giving movies a more energetic feeling intended to compete with the small screen. These fundamental shifts, in the concept of the audience, in the types of narratives being offered, and in the ways in which theater-goers went to the cinema, required specific moral guidelines and audience-based opinions from the many censors, raters, and commentators observing the industry's

narrative output and its effects on the moral fabric of society.

In the 1960s and 1970s, Hollywood aesthetics and technology shifted in ways that affected the color, format, sound, special effects, and editing of a film. These technological developments were used to emphasize the thematic aspects of a film. Slow-motion photography became an icon of the era, and was often employed to highlight a character's loneliness or a novel special effects sequence. In another break with the past, actors were no longer dominated the attention a film received, but shared the limelight with directors, production designers, composers, and directors of photography. Although wide-gauge photography had been much the rage in the previous decade, by 1970 the use of 70-mm wide-gauge photography wound down, and with it the use of the six-track TODD-AO magnetic stereo. Tied to advancements in sound-recording technology and photography, filmmaking became even more flexible and less effortful, resulting in the continued popularity of Documentary Realism, postwar style. The experience of going to the cinema, became associated with sensationalism, be it in the realm of special effects, music, sound, photography, or production design, further enforcing a distinction between what one might expect to see on television, and what awaited viewers at their local cinemaplex.

Throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and into the 2000s, cinema has continued to exist as a pastime and export from the United States to the rest of the world. But the unprecedented changes brought about by the arrival of the Internet and the digital age has affected the discourse on how movies, and media, are to be properly consumed. As media

continues to saturate the waking life of the average American, the discourse has shifted from concern over an activity whose negative influence could seep out and harm society to speaking of media as an environment in which we are all, always existing. This all-encompassing realm requires constant and careful navigation by individual consumers, who must be taught the methods to observe, question, and police their own viewing habits. This dissertation will address these shifts, contextualizing key moments in the development of the discourse from the 1930s until the present day.

1.3) Analytical framework

Censorship is understood as both repressive and constitutive in its outcomes, with scholars perennially asking how boundaries, in flux and relative to socio-historical temporalities, come to bear on the construction, consumption and interpretation of cultural objects such as the movies. In presenting my analytic framework for examining the question of how ambiguity has shifted over time from being associated only with societal danger to being a tool for generating moral self-knowledge, I will discuss a few relevant intellectual developments for the categories of filth, moral repercussion, responsibilization, and telos.

Borrowing from the science and technology literature, this dissertation adopts a broad definition of classification and categorical work. Bowker and Star's (1999) approach to categorical work involves the distinction, naming, and sorting of objects, situations, or people into classes, kinds, or categories. Here classification is understood as "spatial, temporal, or spatio-temporal segmentation[s] of the world," wherein categories are derived

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from "work and from other kinds of organized activity, including conflicts over meaning, that occur when multiple groups fight over the nature of a classificatory system and its categories" (1999: 10 and 285, respectively). In his tome on meaning and quotidian life, Goffman (1986) argues individuals actively project sense-making frames into their immediate environs and that these assumptions are often unnoticeable, especially when they are congruent with the actions of others. Understanding keying as those actions or utterances that are intended to cue others as to the meaning of the interaction, up-keying involves the layering of what Goffman terms laminations onto an interaction, indicating the engagement of a different frame.

Those actors involved in controlling content were (and remain) concerned with the nature of the primary frame utilized by viewers, as well as their ability (or inability) to engage in keying, particularly up-keying, when viewing a film. The key of "make-believe," which Goffman acknowledges as fantasies, pastimes, or entertainment which participants are supposed to believe will not result in anything practical, also includes dramatic scriptings. Goffman wrote, "their deepest significance is that they provide a mock-up of everyday life, a put-together script of unscripted social doings, and thus are a source of broad hints concerning the structure of this domain" (1986: 53).[1] As I will discuss, many content classifiers worried about potential instances of missed keying. Would all viewers understand the key of make-believe, or would they mistake it for a legitimate frame to be

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[1] Though Goffman leaves, "quite unconsidered the question of how the copy can come to affect the original, as when crime films establish language and style for actual criminals" (ibid.: 48). Goffman seems unaware that earlier sociologists affiliated with the Payne Fund Studies raised this particular question, the subject of chapter 4.

employed in their own everyday lives? The analytical framework described here weaves in concerns over keying and missed keys, by way of the dimensions of filth, moral repercussion, responsibility/responsibilization and telos.

Filth and Moral Ambiguity

Filth is the analytic category, which encompasses all of the problems that are read into a filmic narrative, and later converted into moral repercussions, responsibility, and brought to reflect on the telos of media as a whole. Often filth is a film's perceived moral ambiguity, and the transposition of moral ambiguity as a danger into a resource is traced in this dissertation by relying on this category. Filth and its attendant dangers are identified and managed in different ways by different organizations. Sometimes a film is labeled problematic because its content is viewed as inappropriate, beyond the pale, or unacceptable. In other instances, films that are morally ambiguous in meaning, and open to too many interpretations, are also dangerous should they not be viewed correctly. This dissertation examines how texts are identified as filth, or interpreted as being morally ambiguous, and how the grounds linking moral ambiguity to filth have shifted over time. Where in the past moral ambiguity was a danger, today parents and children are encouraged to embrace moral gray zones as opportunities to discuss and discover their personal moral boundaries. By emphasizing moral ambiguity, the analytical findings of this dissertation are able to speak to larger issues, such as the moral ambiguity and dangers associated with loose religious identities, performances of gender and sexuality, and racial belonging, to name a few.

Classification systems do not merely arrange discrete categories, but rather construct and maintain relations between, across, or amongst them (Durkheim and Mauss, 1963). In Mary Douglas's (2005) seminal writing on formal filth and purity, she argues that anything that confuses or contradicts an extant classification systems is often deemed dangerous, and condemned as a result. "Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements" (2005: 44). In other words, Douglas asks how the rejection of inappropriate elements is constructed and conducted.

The context in which one evaluates, interprets, or analyzes the content of a film is an important aspect in labeling a cultural object or text as filth. Eck (2001) argues that the act of classifying is most sensitive when the subject under consideration is contested or controversial, compounded by the ambiguity of an image or subject. Ambiguous images are further frustrated, and identifiable, when they lack a clear category in which they may be located (such as the frames of art, pornography, anatomic information, etc.). The context in which censors, classifiers, raters, educators, and scholars view and discuss cinema and its proper role in society differs dramatically. Context enables and engenders certain forms of moral ambiguity, and over time has attributed new resources to moral ambiguity. Filth and moral ambiguity in the work of content control actors will be discussed in further detail in the chapters presented below, focusing the conversation on the transition from moral ambiguity as a danger or filth, to moral ambiguity as a resource.

In addition, the outcomes associated with such ambiguity have changed. In order to capture this transition this dissertation also examines moral repercussion, which is the next category in this analytical framework.

Moral Repercussion

Moral repercussions are the detrimental effects on viewers associated with watching inappropriate material. Various actors attempt to define these repercussions in their own manner, revealing their position towards cinema and their approach to controlling cinematic content. Moral repercussions are also the grounds and rationales through which censors and other content controllers understand and defend their work. In any given moral belief, such as the conviction that certain narratives or cinematic texts are dangerous to consume, identifying where and upon whom the danger of contamination is located is captured by the category of moral repercussion. This is the idea of defilement held by those arguing for control of media circulation and consumption. Because actors and organizations differ in their thoughts on how defilement occurs, and what its results will be, what a moral repercussion is depends on how an audience or viewer is expected to interpret a film or narrative. Furthermore, such declarations can be politicized, and employed for multiple ends.

For example, sociologists and early communications scholars conducting research as part of the Payne Fund Studies on the effects of cinema offered a host of outcomes, ranging from disrupted sleep patterns to gender and age variations in the reception of a film. As will be

discussed in chapter 4, researchers associated with the Payne Fund Studies were under pressure from the project's research directors to portray their results in a manner amenable to advocating for federal censorship of the movies – an explicitly moral endeavor that many were ill at ease to support. In the mean time, sociologists and educators following this line of research were interested to evidence whether factors such as one's background or personality played into how one interpreted a film, and what sort of informal education the cinema might be. The moral repercussions of viewing a film, and the way in which a researcher or educator sought to mitigate or amplify these effects, is tied to active and passive constructions of the viewer, as well as the neutral viewer for whom desirable and harmful effects of movies was to be decided upon by viewers themselves.

Moral repercussions are key in interpreting the decisions of New York State cinema censors as well. Censors, of the opinion that certain narratives could for example awaken or heighten an inclination to commit crime for personal gain, were keen on reducing if not completely eliminating such narratives from public realms of cinema consumption. But without understanding the moral repercussion with which censors engaged in their practice, their work risks being read as shallow and naïve. On the contrary, censors also attempted to eliminate narratives that offended belief in state and government agencies to protect society, highlighting a moral repercussion of which they themselves were also at risk of incurring. This will be discussed with greater detail in chapter 3.

In order to view and interpret a film, decide on its appropriate audience, and successfully

limit its circulation to that audience, actions are taken on the beliefs of what would happen to (which) viewers should they consume the movie. But whose responsibility it is to ensure that such an event does or does not come to pass, and delineate what the outcome and purpose of a movie and its consumption is supposed to be? This question is especially pertinent in light of the transition moral ambiguity has experienced, from a constant potential moral danger into an opportunity for self-knowledge. Viewers themselves are pressured to generate the limits for their viewing practices, while defining the moral repercussions for viewing controversial or ambiguous material according to their own interpretations. I will now turn to a discussion of responsibilization and telos, two remaining analytic categories which help unpack this larger transition.

Responsibility / Responsibilization

In this dissertation, responsibility refers to the allocation of moral duty whereby certain actors, roles, or positions are held responsible for reducing or alleviating societal ills associated with viewing cinematic filth. Responsibility is routinely used to implicate filmmakers, studios, or the industry; parents and guardians of younger viewers; and audiences and viewers themselves. But assigning responsibility also involves a process of responsibilization, wherein the ability to stem the flow of moral infringements or dangers from the consumption of morally ambiguous texts are linked to certain roles and positions. Because actors and organizations involved in controlling cinematic content articulate blame and action differently, this process can involve education campaigns, rallying calls for changes in the industry's production trends, or legislative efforts aimed at creating a

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federal censorship office.

While responsibilization is associated with deregulated market environments, or the process of deregulation, and the attendant weakening of decision-making ability by consumers, this dissertation employs the term responsibility in a moral sense. This usage of the term enables the process of responsibilizing different actors over time to capture environments where shifts in the market are not necessarily front and center. As this dissertation demonstrates, even if a market is not being deregulated responsibility can remain far from the hands of individual viewers. In fact, what has spurned the recent embracing of individual moral decision making is not a deregulatory market environment but an exponential increase in the size and scope of the contemporary media scape. Furthermore, I will argue that the responsibility of viewers is also tied to the legitimacy a set of content control actors or organizations establishes for its practices. Writing on censorship, Bourdieu argues the practice imposes a form or manner for receiving texts, determining the form of its reception as well. Here the system of censorship is in some instances capable of working itself into a state of invisible perception and ultimately legitimation. To this end Bourdieu writes, "symbolic violence can only be exercised by the person who exercises it, and endured by the person who endures it, in a form which results in its misrecognition as such, in other words, which results in its recognition as legitimate" (1991: 140).

In order for their opinions to be seen as legitimate, New York State censors avoided the

word censorship. Similarly contending with a public discourse that emphasis freedom (of choice, of speech, etc.), classifiers of the past as well as contemporary media raters position themselves as information bearers rather than decision makers. Film educators were involved in establishing a different sort of legitimacy around their opinions, as their aim was to enable individual viewers to find their own opinions legitimate, over the interpretation, recommendation, or reviews of others. While educators may have had opinions on Hollywood's production trends, the film appreciation movement was not built with the intention of shifting such trends. Though Bourdieu does not extend his thoughts on legitimacy in censorial practice to the notion of responsibilization, I argue legitimacy is connected to responsibilization.

Organizations who give less information about their practices to the public, such as state censors, have been or are greatly legitimized in their work, while conferring almost no responsibility upon viewers. Other organizations like the Film Estimate Board of National Organizations (discussed in chapter 5), or the contemporary Common Sense Media (discussed in chapter 6), bestow much responsibility on individual viewers but have less legitimacy in establishing their opinions as the ones the film industry should abide by. Responsibility as an analytic category helps train the reader's attention on the shifting distribution of moral duty as the industry shifted not from market regulation to deregulation, but from censorship (or coincidentally, regulation as the industry referred to its own moral policing practice) to ratings. The underlying goal of achieving cleaner screens and assigning responsibility will be considered by the last analytic category of telos.

Telos

The larger aim or endeavor for which an organization or actor engages in its specific practice of controlling cinematic content is described in the analytic category of telos. This category accounts for the differences between those content control efforts that are imbued with a hopeful sense from those clouded with a pessimistic expectations of viewers and their interpretive capabilities, the potential effects of cinema, and its final and proper place in relation to society. Telos is the ideology that maintains a certain form of classification of cinematic content – be it explicit censorship, classification, or ratings. When or how does one meaning of an object, as art for example, become more compelling than another meaning of an object, as obscenity? Or as Beisel (1993) asks, on what basis are various meanings applied to an object? The analytical dimension of telos examines these grounds and reasonings.

Moments of "performative contradiction" are also indicative of the underlying telos with which those engaged in controlling content approach their work (Butler 1997). When an organization such as the New York State Motion Picture Division defines as illegitimate for public screening those films whose content incite to crime, would tend to corrupt morals, or are inhuman, indecent, sacrilegious or immoral, it is stating what it does not want stated. This statement exposes the values and expectations for viewers undergirding the work of the organization, the censorship of cinema for public viewing in the State of New York. In this case, presented in depth in chapter 3, state censors engaged in their practice

with a pessimistic telos of cinema, anticipating audiences would be incapable of distinguishing between morally appropriate and inappropriate behavior (as defined by them). In other words, New York State censors were concerned about detrimental potential outcomes of morally ambiguous narratives. Finding cinema as a whole to be a potent and dangerous medium, they advocated cleaning the screen of any and all ills before allowing audiences access to a film. The larger aim of the New York censors was to protect viewers from ambiguous or misleading films, but also to protect those citizens who, though not at risk of violating the law, might take offense to depictions of the justice system, or local law enforcement.

This telos of protection differs greatly from the telos of film appreciation educators for example (see chapter 4). The film appreciation movement of the 1930s and 1940s contended that students and young viewers could be educated on the appropriate methods of analyzing filmic content and narrative, and that cinema itself could be put to positive social use. Here the telos, of instilling critical viewing skills, is tied to a slightly different sense of what constitutes cinematic filth as compared to the censors. For film appreciation educators, filth or ambiguity was defined by leading questions, for example by asking viewers to compare their perception of historical accuracy in relevant films, paying attention to both wardrobe and narrative feasibility. The moral repercussions anticipated were also more personalized for film appreciation educators, manifest not as an outbreak of crime in low income pockets of the city but rather as personal ennui among viewers who felt their lives did not match with projected depictions of glamour, romance, and glitter.

This scholarship forms an important foundation for the redefining of moral ambiguity as a resource, as opposed to a danger, by later media raters (discussed in chapter 6).

1.4) Logic of research design

This dissertation examines modes of apprehending and evaluating cinema and morality by various actors and organizations that have shaped the circulation of cinematic objects either through explicit or implicit means of content control. Here I will discuss the collections of the archives visited and highlight their particular strengths for this research. I will also detail the methodological approach of analogical thinking and theorizing that has influenced this dissertation. I will then conclude with a discussion about the specific types of data evaluated here, focusing on the rejection sheets, classification decisions, and media ratings of different organizations.

In this dissertation, I rely on three main archives for primary materials. These archives are housed at the Motion Picture Academy's Margaret Herrick Library, the New York State archives, and the Georgetown University Library. The immense trove of documents that flew back and forth between the Production Code Authority and member studios are housed at the impressive library of the Motion Picture Academy of Arts and Sciences. Aside from these invaluable primary documents, one can also find a vast collection of periodical publications from throughout the 20th century, personal collections of well-known industry members, oral histories, clippings, telegrams, and other miscellaneous communication between industry actors. This makes the collection incredibly valuable for

addressing questions of transition and change across the history of American cinema and morality, and comprises most of the material analyzed in chapter 2, on the work and connections between the industry's own regulatory board and other organizations involved in screen cleaning efforts. This chapter also relies on the Quigley Papers, housed at the Georgetown University Library, where Quigley's relations with the Production Code Authority and the American Catholic leadership are brought into sharper focus.

The collection of censorship papers at the New York State archives offers another trove of primary documents, but one that is far less utilized and sifted through than the documents of the Production Code Authority. The New York State censorship board was very thorough and very industrious, yielding dozens of cubic feet of catalogued material. Here one can consult with a wide variety of intra- and inter-organizational communication. Censors wrote often to one another in the form of internal memos, viewing reports on films, and elimination bulletins for films that were rejected a license for projection in the state. Distributor and exchange correspondence files can also be found here, along with state bureaucracy-wide exams and questionnaires, annual reports conveying the work of the bureau to bureaucratic higher ups, and letters between members of New York State bureaucracy. There is also a plethora of communication means between state censors and various community leaders. These materials are extensively relied upon in chapters 3 and 5, on the work of the New York State Motion Picture Division, as well as the industry-affiliated Film Estimate Board of National Organizations, whose bulletins were read and catalogued by Motion Picture Division employees.

Analogical methods are essential for articulating the result of research and the theoretical stances one advances (Vaughan, 2004). As Vaughan details, one approach to analogical thinking is to shift the social setting of the selected cases in order to further or advance theory around a concept, theme, topic, or phenomenon. "[A]nalogical theorizing can uncover generic social processes, previously unidentified, that generalize across cases," she writes, situating theorizing as the result of the analytical and written processes of collecting, examining, and presenting empirical material (2004: 341). Vaughan outlines the method as beginning with an explanation via thick description of a case or site, positioning thick description as a protective measure against coercing data to fit the concepts or theoretical convictions which inevitably accompany any researcher who embarks on a project of critical inquiry. By organizing material into categories the researcher has already identified with previous cases or sites, Vaughan's approach to analogical thinking and theorizing culminates in cross-case comparisons that employ these empirically driven categories as analytic stepping stones between seemingly disparate instances, situations, or events.

This project is inspired by Vaughan's method of analogical thinking and theorizing. The social setting for selected cases presented here will not vary as much as the cases Vaughan has investigated, yet there are shifts in time, as well as shifts in discourse around the limiting and controlling of the circulation of cinematic images which these cases bring to light. Where Vaughan focuses on organizational misconduct and deviance, this research employs analogical thinking in order to further theorize the multi-faceted site of cinema

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censorship and control, through the analytical categories of filth, moral repercussion, responsibilization and telos described above. These categories were arrived at via close examination of the words, decisions, and judgments of different organizations and actors with some role to play in the ascription of morality to filmic narratives and thus their eventual distribution, circulation, and reception. Beginning with the rich literature on cinema history, historical and contemporary cases with ample empirical evidence were identified and examined. While the archives, their construction, and the documentary record should not be approached without the proverbial grain of salt and an armful of questions (Vaughan, 2004), archival materials are also a valuable glimpse into the techniques, tools, and thoughts of the past. Read carefully, they may further enable the construction of comparisons between the past and the present. Starting from the premise that archival materials need be read multiple times and pitted against other records and empirical material, materials from several archives as well as multiple types of archival materials were consulted (as discussed above).

This dissertation examines rejection sheets, classification decisions and pamphlets, as well as contemporary media ratings, communication between and among relevant actors, and any accompanying reviews offered by a content control organization. In presenting these materials in the chapters below, close attention will be paid to the manner in which cinema is evaluated and labeled as filthy or morally ambiguous, and the construction of responsibility for the state, parents, or individual viewers. Questioning the divide between so-called primary and secondary source material, several research articles, monographs, and

educational guides to film appreciation are also consulted, though they are treated as primary materials.[2] The conceptual categories of filth, repercussion, and responsibility are somewhat obscured by some these materials, or what this project terms the mixed mode of apprehending cinema and its appropriate societal role.

The third selection of empirical material involves movie narratives. Scholars have taken many different approaches to locating, sampling, and evaluating cinematic narratives.[3] Aside from the historical project of linking cinema to American society, the result of this method is a series of fascinating graphs evidencing narrative trends. Others have analyzed fields of film production, such as independent films (Ortner, 2013), by first defining independent filmmaking and then creating as wide a viewing list as possible. Here the anthropologist Sherry Ortner immerses herself in the themes and motifs of several hundred independent films, organizing them into topical groups and presenting a few in close detail.[4] Motivated by such creative analytic engagement with narratives, a close assessment of the classification decisions and patterns of an umbrella organization of film classifiers, a sample of American comedies was constructed. I then apply and engage the same set of questions, designed to address filmic structure and narrative morality, to this sample of films. Here the issues of classificatory decision and indecision are raised and

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[2] I am indebted to a post-presentation discussion by the Sites of Cinema scholars at Columbia University, especially historian and cinema scholar Hilary Hallett, for this key point.

[3] One detailed longitudinal research design involved the sampling of film plots from the exhibitors' (or theater managers) periodical, the *Motion Picture Herald.* This sample was then organized by type of plot, focusing on the experiences and trajectory of the protagonist, yielding insightful and unique graphs on shifting trends in film plots from 1920-1960 (May, 2000).

[4] Ortner's analysis of independent film plots revolving around acts, or suspicion, of pedophilia offers a compelling account of the role of moral ambiguity in filmic narratives today.

examined in closer detail. This approach to narrative yields additional texture to the concepts of moral ambiguity, moral repercussion, and responsibility. I find that humor is associated with classificatory ambiguity, and may be exasperated by demographic and industry shifts (see chapter 5 for more on this topic). Individual films and their narratives are also discussed in chapters 2 and 6, and briefly in the concluding chapter. In chapter 2, I discuss a few films that have been identified by scholars as playing a pivotal role in the transition from censorship to ratings. In chapter 6, I focus on a recent example of a particularly morally ambiguous film, in order to highlight the contemporary way in which moral ambiguity is linked to self-knowledge as opposed to societal danger. And in the concluding chapter, I focus on more recent examples of films that have generated ratings controversies, allowing the reader to compare and contrast the discourse around controversial films across the 20th century and into the 21st.

The analogical approach adopted in the chapters below will focus on the construction of the categories of cinematic filth, moral repercussion, and responsibility. These categories address the hypothesis that controlling cinema, i.e. managing cinematic pollution, highlights forms of ambiguity (and renews efforts at classifying and controlling cinematic content) by exposing discursive patterns in the evaluation, labeling, and management of cinematic content. By evaluating and labeling certain narratives and images as cinematic filth, supporting such findings with specific moral repercussions among viewers, and offering a responsible party for the management of cinematic filth and thus the protection of certain audiences from moral harm, the act of controlling cinema makes evident

instances of moral ambiguity at the same time that it constructs arguments for the need

and scholarly contributions of such classificatory knowledge. How the tenor and texture of

moral ambiguity and danger in cinema have shifted over time will be presented and

discussed in the chapters that follow.

1.5) Chapter contributions

By closely examining the many sites and activities of cinema censorship and control, each

chapter of this project contributes to a deeper understanding of how classification creates

and manages ambiguity. Careful descriptions of how organizations and actors label,

apprehend, and manage cinema and its consumption will be employed to build the

conceptual categories of cinematic filth, moral repercussion, responsibility, and telos. In

outlining each chapter, I will raise these analytical categories and the contributions they

make to this dissertation.

Chapter 2 – Professional Moralism at the Production Code Authority

In the first empirical chapter, I will examine the relationships between the industry's

Production Code Authority and other organizations concerned with media morality. I

focus in particular on communications had between the PCA and the Church, other

censorship boards, and member studios. This chapter also provides a brief overview on the

transition from regulation to ratings, a process that began in the late 1920s and culminated

with the establishment of the Classification and Ratings Administration in 1968. The

discussion here highlights the independence of the PCA in their opinions on moral

repercussion and moral responsibility for cleaning the screen, despite their continual communication with other organizations. The industry slowly embraced the bracketing of audiences into smaller groups, and by the end of the 1960s understandings of moral responsibility came to implicate the actions of exhibitors and filmmakers, challenging them to think in terms of audience niches instead of one mass market. As this chapter highlights, this development is critical in the larger transition from censorship to ratings, and the attribution of positive qualities to moral ambiguity.

Chapter 3 – The New York State Motion Picture Division and the Meaning Making Practices of Censors

This chapter presents the words and judgments of the state of New York's censorship office, the Motion Picture Division, and deals with the practice of censorship and the specific type of filth, moral repercussion, and responsibility it engendered. The first half of this chapter relies on personnel files for the Motion Picture Division, while the second half offers a close reading of the office's rejection slips. The main theoretical contribution of this chapter is to further articulate how censors deem certain films ambiguous, and thus filthy, and what attendant problems are anticipated for such films. These moral repercussions are articulated and activated in the organization's decisions to reject such films a license for public projection. In contrast to conventional approaches to censorship and the work of censors, which maintain that censors never understood themselves to be ordinary viewers and consumers of cinema and thus equally at risk of the moral repercussions they detected in movies, I argue that censors imagined themselves in the

audience, basing appropriate moral decisions for motion picture exhibition in the state on their sensibility as employees of the state. I build this argument around two types of viewers, the virtuous and the susceptible citizen. While different in their vulnerability to moral repercussion, both of these audiences required the censor as a responsible agent protecting them from harmful films.

Chapter 4 – Good Pictures and the Construction of Proper Cinematic Consumption

How do social scientists and researchers construct knowledge around cinematic filth and danger, and how is moral repercussion and responsibility encoded in such knowledge? This chapter examines pioneering research by sociologists and educators in the 1930s and 1940s, highlighting the work of Frederic Thrasher, Edgar Dale, Herbert Blumer, and other scholars associated with the Payne Fund Studies, the Motion Picture Research Council, and New York University, and demonstrates the beginnings of the transition of moral ambiguity from a danger into a resource. The first and third sections examine research efforts by social science scholars at the behest of moral entrepreneurs who felt the motion picture was dangerous and needed to be controlled. How morality was suffused in, or kept at bay from, their research findings and the greater implications they found for cinema's societal effects is discussed in detail, as scholars developed an at-times neutral, at-times mixed tone of moral ambiguity, repercussion and cinematic consumption.

The second section of this chapter contrasts social scientific research with one of the Payne Fund Studies' outlier volumes, the education scholar Edgar Dale's work on film

appreciation techniques and methods. This is a different form of pollution management, wherein the viewing of cinema was seen as impossible to avoid, requiring instead that those who consume it ought to be taught how to manage their consumption and interpretation by way of appropriate instruction instead of any kind of censorship or organized effort at controlling the production of narratives. Dale's work also differs greatly from the other scholars associated with the Payne Fund Studies in terms of responsibility, and ultimately in his underlying telos of cinema – if and when properly consumed. This chapter demonstrates that in constructing moral knowledge around the consuming of cinema, the child viewer was activated and responsibilized in different ways by scholars of different stripes. Yet despite these differences, scholars were focused on how the citizen/consumer was best, or most appropriately, positioned in relation to the text, and what to make of moral ambiguity in a movie. These thoughts are picked up by contemporary media raters, discussed in chapter 6.

Chapter 5 – Film Classifiers and the Transfer of Cultural Authority

As the legal structures buttressing state, and in some ways industry censorship eroded, I turn my focus to an examination of implicit forms of censorship, iterated as family-oriented ratings by an organization close to the film industry. Here I analyze the classificatory decisions made by the largest group of mostly women raters, the Film Estimate Board of National Organizations (FEBNO, who were associated with the MPPDA). The rise of America's first teenagers as market consumers, and the appropriate moral boundaries for their cinematic consumption, were debated among FEBNO members, and are reflected in

their decisions. Moral ambiguity, and parental responsibility, are regularly highlighted here for the first time by movie raters associated with the industry. This chapter also offers empirical evidence for the conventional notion that comedies are a difficult genre to classify, as humor allows for layers of meaning under which subversive criticism or commentary may be located. Analyzing eight years of FEBNO's classification decisions, I find that those films whose form reinforces extant societal norms tend to create less classification struggles than those that do not include such moral, and comedic, ambiguity. In contrast to film appreciation educators, the classification of films by way of age-based audience categories constructed a responsible parent consumer, concerned with the viewing fare of their children and equipped with the appropriate materials to make the responsible decision for their child(ren).

Chapter 6 – Moral Ambiguity as a Resource in Contemporary Media Ratings

This chapter weaves together the conceptual categories of filth and moral ambiguity moral repercussion, responsibility and telos with a close analysis of contemporary media morality management. Here I offer a systematic comparison between the concerns of the Motion Picture Division censors of New York State, the pollution management knowledge advanced by sociologists and mass communications scholars, and the fragility of meaning with contemporary media ratings. I focus in specific on the ratings of Commonsensemedia.org, a contemporary media watchdog organization that aims to aid parents in making decisions for their children's media consumption, extending even beyond cinema (including music, video games, books, and TV shows). I also examine the

research reports published and cited by CSM, highlighting the responsibilization of parents and children built into site, and the moral treatment of narrative content. By examining the work of contemporary media raters and bloggers, I argue this approach to pollution management relies on multiple and at times conflicting moral discourses, including media research and its alleged effects on social behavior, techniques of classification and parental "responsibilization," developmental models of child development, and a discourse of free and intelligent choices by parents and child consumers themselves. Common Sense Media merges notions of individualized choice and responsible viewership practices with media research, positioning consumers in an inescapable media environment that demands safe navigation on their end. As a result, moral ambiguity is converted into a resource, allowing parents and children to generate self-awareness and monitor their own viewership practices regardless of whether anyone else is monitoring them.

Chapter 2
Professional Moralism at the Production Code Authority

2.1) Concerns about Censorship in Hollywood

During the rising tide of the years of Depression in the United States, millions of

Americans went to theaters on a weekly basis.[5] For as commonplace as the pictures were, a

deep undercurrent of fear and suspicion swirled around the pastime. What were the

motion pictures – innocent entertainment, or the devil's work? Many, such as the

publishing tycoon William Randolph Hearst, argued for a federal office of censorship that

would systematically maintain standards of public morality and reduce stress for the

industry by making producers answerable to one office only. Others, like the Catholic

clergy and the Legion of Decency, took it upon themselves to review and classify pictures

according to their tastes and standards. And still others argued for smaller-scale state or

municipal censorship (see the next chapter on the New York State Motion Picture

Division).

This chapter examines the relationships the industry's Production Code Authority had

with the Church, as well as its interactions with other censorship boards and member

studios. I will discuss the transition from regulation to ratings within the MPPDA that

took place in the late 1960s. While the PCA maintained an incredible range of

relationships and interactions with neighboring organizations, I will argue they were an

independent unit whose members maintained their own expectations of moral

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[5] It is estimated that attendance dropped from ninety million per week to sixty million per week between 1930 and 1933. See Katz and Nolen, 2012.

repercussion and ethos of moral responsibility in regulating cinematic content. In particular, I will highlight the articulation of moral responsibility to clean the screen that emerges in the PCA's interactions with these various organizations, and the way this responsibility is ultimately cast off onto the shoulders of other industry members such as exhibitors and filmmakers in the transition from regulation to ratings.

The threat of more legislative action for censorship made industry members nervous, as such legislation was believed to have a negative impact on a film's box office. Hollywood reacted as early as the 1910s, establishing a trade association, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association (MPPDA, today's Motion Picture Association of America) and a specific office, the Studio Relations Council (and later, after 1934, the Production Code Authority), in an effort to avoid problems with censors and increasingly antagonistic pressure groups. But by 1922 the trade organization needed a president who could defend the industry from censorship legislation, and enticed President Harding's Postmaster General, William Hays, to take up the challenge.[6] Hays was a lawyer by training, and fit the bill in other ways: he was a Presbyterian Church elder, a non-drinker, and a non-smoker, from Sullivan, Indiana. "No micromanagement, never star-struck, he spent more time in New York, Washington, D.C., or his home in Sullivan, Indiana, than in Hollywood," as one scholar put it (Doherty 2007: 35).

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[6] This trend of bringing in politicians from DC to head the organization has continued, as Hays' successor was Eric Johnston, US Chamber of Commerce President, and later Jack Valenti, special advisor to Lyndon B. Johnson. More recently, Kansas Congressmen turned U.S. Agriculture Secretary Dan Glickman held the reins, which are now held by former U.S. Senator Chris Dodd.

Hays seized the opportunity to place the burden of addressing the threats of censorship, and abiding by the Code, squarely on the shoulders of industry members (Black, 1996). In one annual report for the MPPDA, he wrote, "Our fight will be won on one condition - that the pictures themselves are <u>right</u>. WE must go into the courts and before the public with clean hands. Unless we do this - until we do this - it is useless to attempt to overcome censorship."[7] Hays also tried to frame the issue as a collective problem, warning, "It is your golden egg that may be endangered ... one bad picture may do more harm than a dozen good ones can do" (emphasis in original).[8] Under his guise, the Studio Relations Council was responsible for ensuring, by way of a list of do's and don'ts, that member studios produced clean content (two Catholics revamped this list, a priest named Daniel Lord and lay Catholic publisher Martin Quigley). Adopted in 1930-1931, it is referred to as the Code. This mixture of economic and moral pressure was what Hays presented to the industry: self-regulation via a Code such as Lord's would be good for the industry, in that it would weaken the position of censorship advocates, and protect the industry's economic cornerstone tactic of block-booking. In this way, Hays and Quigley attempted to create economic and moral incentives among producers to avoid content that was deemed lewd or licentious – despite the widely held conviction that that more often than not, it was just such content that yielded the highest box office.

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[7] 1929 Annual Bulletin, in the Will Hays Papers (available on microfilm through Inter-Library Loan). See reel 43, part 1.

[8] Ibid.

The context of censorship, both in the industry and surrounding it, had changed by the time the Studio Relations Council was reorganized and renamed as the Production Code Authority in 1934. As pressure from the Catholic and religious pressure groups coalesced into the Legion of Decency, the Code was re-enforced by requiring member studios to obtain the approval of the PCA, in the form of a seal, before releasing their pictures for distribution and exhibition. Obtaining the seal meant submitting one's script for approval by the PCA before beginning principal photography.[9] These maneuvers influenced which films would eventually reach a theater for exhibition. Some scholars argue Joseph Breen (the eventual head of the PCA, about whom much more will be said below) and Quigley insisted on such changes, and presented them to Hays as demands made by the Church (Leff and Simmons, 2001). Others have gone further, characterizing the PCA as synonymous with the Legion of Decency, especially after its reorganization in 1934 (Jowett 1976, Sklar 1994, Moley 1945). Opposing this characterization, Jacobs (1991) has argued that the PCA did not march in lock step with the Legion, basing her argument on the archival files for films that, while approved by the PCA, were condemned by the Legion. This chapter sides with the work of Jacobs, arguing that the head of the PCA certainly had connections to the Catholic clergy, but the PCA itself was not a simple tool of Catholic morality.

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[9] The so-called "Hollywood Jury" of studio executives who reviewed complaints by a member studio against the SRC's decision and often found in favor of one another against the SRC was abolished, and all complaints went directly to the New York office of the MPPDA instead. Hays also introduced the threat of a $25,000 fine to any member studio that released an unapproved picture.

Studies about the post-WWII era yield small increments of challenge and change to the legal grounds for censoring motion pictures. Provoked by a slew of legal cases involving the legality of blocking films from exhibition and distribution, First Amendment protections of freedom of speech were eventually extended to include the motion picture (Wittern-Keller, 2008). The success of racy European imports to the U.S. market, such as Antonioni's *Blow Up*, or risqué American titles such as *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* were also making a stir, and are credited with motivating the industry to make the shift from regulation to ratings. This, along with larger generational shifts characterized by the burgeoning youth culture of the 1960s, and the fading threat of legislative censorship, allowed the industry to experiment with alternative regulation in order to protect their box office while shedding its out-fashioned cloak of decency.

Observing the box office in the mid-1960s, then-MPAA President Jack Valenti (Motion Picture Association of America, the new and shortened name of the former MPPDA), another poach from the capitol, this time from the administration of President Johnson's White House, noticed that the times were changing. An avid follower of U.S. Supreme Court decisions around decency, Valenti finally overhauled the PCA and reformulated it as the Classification and Ratings Administration (CARA) in 1968. This office is still in operation today, rating films as G, PG, PG-13, R, or NC-17, articulating a shared moral responsibility for the repercussions of cinema on vulnerable viewers that responsibilizes parents and the industry (this can be contrasted with the responsibilization of parents and vulnerable viewers such as children in the work of Common Sense Media, in chapter 6).

Before discussing these contextual shifts, I will turn to the public image of the PCA and their interactions with other organizations, focusing on the ways in which moral responsibility and repercussion were articulated in their communication and coordination with the Church, censors, and studios. I will then sketch the context of the 1960s and the replacement of the PCA with the CARA by discussing two titles associated with the Code's demise, and will conclude with a final section examining the context of switch from regulation to ratings made by the industry in the late 1960s. The build up to this shift will be discussed by highlighting smaller changes in the articulation of responsibility by industry censors and their cohorts throughout the 1930s, 40s, 50s, and 60s.

2.2) The Public Image of the Production Code Authority

Since its inception, both the PCA and the MPPDA continually argued that what they were doing was not censorship, and remained publicly and inwardly opposed to any censorship legislation. Interviewed by *Look* magazine, MPPDA President William Hays discussed his opposition to censorship, stating, "Censorship is contrary to everything our nation fought for at Valley Forge and Bunker Hill…Besides, it doesn't work." But "self-regulation" of production was stressed as being essential, as Hays also noted, "Self-regulation of the movies is actuated solely by questions of propriety and good taste."[10] Though the article

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[10] Both quotes from *Look Magazine*, "How Movies Are Censored!" August 2, 1938, p12 and 14 respectively. Motion Picture Association of America. Production Code Administration records, Margaret Herrick Library (MHL from hereon – this is the official library and archival repository for the MPPDA's papers). See the clippings folder "Censorship (1938-1939)." The article gave the impression that the Code was more of a laughing matter than something to be taken seriously. THIS IS PERMITTED, THIS IS FORBIDDEN, the magazine illustrated, with humorous photographs of a couple nuzzling and looking toward camera (labelled "allowed") and an image of the same couple, the man kissing the woman's neck, her head tilted back and arms around his head (labeled "forbidden").

highlighted the moral components of the work carried on by the PCA, it also discussed the economic benefit of the office's presence. "Hollywood executives estimate the Hays office saves the industry between five and 10 million dollars a year by preventing production of film which would be banned or cut severely by outside censors," *Look* reported.[11]

There is evidence that later employees at the PCA also thought of the organization's inception as being of chiefly economic interest for the industry. One prominent oral history, between the well-regarded archivist for the Motion Picture Academy's library Barbara Hall and Albert Van Schmus, an employee of the PCA in the post-WWII period, discusses the organization's origins and its concerns with the industry's moral standards. "[T]he reason we were concerned about the moral standards was that if we weren't concerned about them, people were not going to go to the movies in the numbers that they wanted them to. So whether anybody agrees with it or will support the idea or not, it was economics that brought the Code into existence," Van Schmus offered (emphasis in original).[12] "If anybody disagrees with me, they may be happy to disagree, but it was the bloody box office that did it, and that's why the Code became so liberal just before the rating system started, was because there was not the protest at the box office about the content of movies," he explained.[13]

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[11] Ibid.

[12] Van Schmus (1993), p116.

[13] Ibid.

Indeed, there was more at stake than morality. A caption next to a photograph of Joan Crawford in another article about the PCA claimed, "Thanks to his skill, the shears have been kept out of the hands of political censor agencies that would wield them far more ruthlessly."[14] With a quarter of a billion people per week visiting movie theaters in 1938, there was indeed much at stake for the industry. Moreover, the industry's major players were more or less behind Hays. "These company-owned or affiliated houses represent only about 13 per cent of the total, but they have over a quarter of the U.S. seating capacity and account for nearly 30 per cent of the gross box-office receipts estimated at around a billion dollars annually," the article highlighted, referring to Hollywood's major studios. "It is almost axiomatic that no picture of any investment importance can be expected to be profitable unless it has access to these theatres," it continued.[15]

Lay Catholic Joseph Breen, head of the PCA from 1934-1954, shared this concern with the effects of cinema on viewers, speaking often about the responsibility the industry had to the great mass of film patrons in all parts of the world. "Because of their widespread popularity, the vividness of their presentation and the facility with which they never fail to impress and to stimulate, too much emphasis cannot be placed upon the need for the exercise of the greatest possible care in the construction of the picture, and, at the same time, the likely effect the picture may have upon the minds of those who see it," he wrote to a colleague in the MPPDA.[16] The reasoning that because the movies were popular, and

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[14] *Fortune Magazine*, "The Hays Office," December 1938. MHL, clippings folder "Censorship (1938-1939)".

[15] Ibid.

because they were stimulating and impressive, the industry owed it to its audiences to regulate the production of their content was one Breen abided by throughout his time at the PCA. This conviction holds the industry entirely responsible, limiting the kind of action or knowledge that could be taken by any concerned citizens about the issue of cinema morality. This limited role for the viewer coincided with the MPPDA's larger orientation, to protect box office by keeping a coherent mass audience image alive (rather than specializing pictures for audiences), but would eventually fall out of favor as censorship legislation crumbled, and a new film generation, exposed to television and risqué foreign films, came of age.

While the discourse of moral repercussion, or the focus of the effects of mass media on cinema-goers, often emphasized the vulnerability of children, taking the protection of an innocent age of childhood very seriously, it has been noted these were often veiled references to class issues (deCordova 1995). While cinema was a new force pulling children away from the home in the 19th and early 20th centuries, where they were outside the purview of their parents, there was considerably more concern about the effects of cinema-going on lower class audiences (see chapter 3 for more on this, a concern which was harbored by New York State censors themselves). As this dissertation evidences, these concerns continue to color the work of film censors, cinema scholars, movie raters, and parent bloggers throughout the 20th century and into the present day. "The question which confronts the exhibitor as he racks his brain in a vain endeavor to solve the problem is, of course, the type of pictures suitable for the child and still containing sufficient 'adult

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[16] Breen to DeBra, 20 November 1944. See the MHL's Vertical File Collection, folder 316, p3-4.

content' to be interesting to the elders," one industry writer editorialized.[17] The writer

continued to discuss the issue, stating:

> "Another angle to the situation which is perplexing some exhibitors hereabout is: 'What is a child?' The question is not facetious. It has deeper significance than may appear on the surface. Some hold that a child sufficiently mature in reasoning to be interested and thoroughly appreciate a children's picture is, in this sophisticated and rapidly moving age, sufficiently mature mentally to absorb the run-of-mine screen productions. On the other hand, if a child is too young to comprehend a children's picture thoroughly, such a booking is a waste of time."[18]

While the question of where to draw the line between child and adult viewer continues to

color contemporary discourse on media morality, expectations for what makes a sufficient

response have been reformulated. The question posed by the editor of the *Exhibitors

Herald-World* anticipated a response wherein the distinguishing factor between child and

adult would apply to *all* children and adults, yet contemporary parlance anticipates that

parents will be responsible for knowing their own children and children responsible for

knowing themselves, instilling in them the critical thinking skills for each to ensure their

own viewing habits and decisions are morally responsible (see chapter 6 for a more detailed

discussion about this).

It is critical to point out that Breen thought of his organization as *part of* the industry, and

wished for others to think of it as such as well. He was incredibly concerned not to come

off as a blue-nosed censor, ready with scissors in hand, but was also concerned that movies

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[17] *Exhibitors Herald-World,* "Films with Exploitation Appeal To Attract Youngsters Asked," p46, MHL Clippings file "Exhibitors Herald-World, July – September 1930."

[18] Ibid. In order to address these concerns, the Hays Office put together a full program via its Committee for Public Relations, consisting of a feature, two short reels, and an educational or industrial short, for Saturday morning matinees for children. This was a direct, streamlined nation-wide distribution model of children's movies, and relieved exhibitors of the burden of programming and locating prints of films suitable for younger viewers.

were made and seen. "Our <u>work</u> - the real work that we do - is concerned principally with the story, weeks and sometimes months, before the date on which the actual production of the film begins," Breen explained in a lengthy letter to one MPPDA attorney.[19] "Where there is likely to be any difficulty, or trouble, we endeavor <u>to stop it before it starts</u>" (emphasis in original).[20] Though Breen embraced the term self-regulation, thinking of his office as one full of writers rather than censors, later PCA employees thought of their work as that of censorship. Van Schmus recollected that, "[I]n a way, you're a professional moralist rather than a personal one, for openly acknowledged reasons."[21] When Hall prods him on the matter he explains in the following way:

> Hall: I guess what you were doing really <u>was</u> censorship, stopping somebody from expressing certain ideas.
>
> Van Schmus: Yes, I had no hesitancy to acknowledge that that's what it was.
>
> Hall: I guess the word though, the expression, was 'self-regulation.'
>
> Van Schmus: That's right. That's the word that we all used. And it's true, in that the studios said, 'Okay, we've got to do something. Tell us how to regulate.' Because they didn't want to do it themselves, I mean within the studios ... They needed an office that they could blame, to take the responsibility. They could say, "Well, they won't let us do it." That's what they needed, that's what they <u>wanted</u>, at least (emphasis in original).[22]

Try as Breen and Hays might, the moral responsibility of producing clean pictures was not entirely impressed upon industry members. Regardless, to those outside of Hollywood, the PCA's seal signaled a form of action taken by the industry in response to the growing clamor around cinema decency. While the Seal comforted many, some, such as those in

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[19] See note 11, p2.

[20] Ibid, p2.

[21] Van Schmus (1993), p112.

[22] Ibid., p103.

the Catholic Church, were more difficult to convince. I will now turn the discussion to the relations the PCA maintained with the Church, and the ways in which moral authority and the limits of decency were articulated, negotiated, and maintained.

2.3) Catholic Relations with the Production Code Authority

"Perhaps a psychologist is entitled to use the term censorship for inhibiting decisions within the mind, but for what the word means in general acceptance it can have no proper application to processes of self-regulation," wrote the lay Catholic publishing king, Martin Quigley. Espousing his views on censorship and cinema morality in an editorial in his own publication, the *Motion Picture Herald*, Quigley continued:

> "No editor, deciding to print this and not print that considers himself engaged in acts of censorship. Nor is he a censor when he lays a heavy pencil over the exuberations (sic) of some untrammeled writer of copy or headline. His operations are commonly considered as pertaining to policy. The motion picture maker, when he decides to issue or not to issue a picture, or any part of a picture, is in the same status as the editor."[23]

Quigley stood by this definition of the practice of regulating movie production as a "consideration of policy" as opposed to censorship throughout the 1930s and into the post-WWII period, even after the threat of a federal office of censorship had become dismantled by the extension of First Amendment rights to the movies. Crediting himself as one of the authors of the Code, Quigley was a vocal defender of the Production Code Authority's brand of self-regulation. Like Hays, his strategy in bringing morality to the movies was to combine moral and economic pressure on the industry with the full weight of the Church behind him. Film historians have characterized him as the "servant of

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[23] "Censorship is Outside", in *Motion Picture Herald*, 03 July 1937.

Rome and Hollywood" (Leff and Simmons 2001: 50). "The difference, in the press and on the screen, between editing and censorship, is quite as distinct as between housekeeping and a raid by the Board of Health," Quigley explained in his editorial. "It is when the business of expression is not permitted to, or cannot, attend to its own business that we have censorship."[24]

The Church maintained regular and frequent communication with both Quigley and Breen throughout Breen's time at the PCA. The Catholic influence on Hollywood has been the subject of scholarly inquiry by film scholars and American historians, focusing on the question of what sort of influence the Catholic establishment had over the industry (Black 1996). A central debate argues whether the Catholic influence was merely that – an influence – while others have portrayed the Catholic clergy as having a stronger grip on the moral boundaries of American cinema (see Black 1998, Walsh 1996, Doherty 2007). An active lay Catholic, Quigley often drafted speeches and addresses for Cardinals across the country.[25] And through his relationship with Breen, Quigley curried favor with the industry on behalf of the Catholic clergy. While these actors may have disagreed on specific issues (such as the notion of organizing approved and condemned titles in lists, or the assignment of specific titles on such lists), they were in accordance on their articulations of the moral responsibility they felt the industry bore to their audience. Communications

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[24] All quotes ibid.

[25] Quigley's papers are stored at the main Georgetown Library. Scattered throughout the two dozen or so boxes in the collection are carbon copies of drafts of public communication that Quigley wrote and sent to various members of the clergy, presumably for their own final revising and spot checking. Film historian Gregory D. Black also comes to a similar conclusion, noting in a footnote regarding a letter that, "McNichols writes that the notes sent to the bishops 'were prepared by Mr. Quigley.'" See Black's *Hollywood Censored* (1996), footnote 94, p196.

between these individuals and organizations reveal that Breen, Quigley, and the Catholic clergy behind the Legion of Decency were somewhat in sync about their definitions of filth, located in the presence of the Jewish producer in Hollywood, and their designation of moral responsibility to clean up the industry's products on the same corners of the industry. I wish to briefly discuss these shared articulations of filth and responsibility here.

Quigley and Breen were already collaborators before Breen officially arrived in Hollywood (Quigley's papers dates their correspondence to as early as 1930, two years before Breen was installed in Hollywood as an assistant to the Production Code Authority).[26] From the get-go, in their discussions about what the Code was and how it should be framed to the public neither Quigley nor Breen ever used the word censorship, but rather went at lengths to define censorship as specifically what they were not arguing for. After some time in Hollywood, Breen sent Quigley a lengthy letter expressing his dissatisfaction to find that the industry took the Code lightly at best. Waffling between staying with the Hays Office and taking a job in the story department of Fox Studios, he wrote to Quigley for his advice. At one point in the letter Breen explained the situation as such:

> "I hate like hell to admit it, but really the Code, to which you and I have given so much, is of no consequence whatever. Much of the talk you hear about it from Hays, or Joy [Hays's representative in Hollywood], is bunk. Joy means well. So does the boss [Hays], for that matter. But the fact is that these dam Jews are a dirty, filthy lot. Their only standard is the standard of the box-office. To attempt to talk ethical values to them is time worse than wasted. The whole thing is hardly more than an act. I give you my solemn word, I haven't heard a single human being in Hollywood, outside our office, ever mention the Code. Censorship? Yes. They all have a lively interest in possible Censorship difficulties but as far as the Code is concerned - bunk."[27]

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[26] Box 1, folder 3 of the Quigley Papers is dedicated solely to the correspondence between Breen and Quigley.

[27] Quigley Papers, Breen to Quigley, 1 May 1932, box 1, folder 3.

Breen's blatant anti-Semitism surfaced in other points of the letter, and is crucial for making sense of his insistence that the industry owed its audience more responsible material.[28] Breen undoubtedly blamed the state of immorality and indecency in American cinema on Jewish producers in Hollywood, whom he characterizes in the same letter as ruthless, lewd, and deplorable. This literal association of Jewish industry members with dirt and filth is a sentiment Breen shared in with Catholic interlocutors, and it is important to note that Quigley's response did not offer any resistance to the association of Jewish industry members with filth. This definition of cinematic filth, locating the source of indecency on the screen as originating from a group of identifiable people, melded the perspective of the PCA to those of the Catholic clergy, who also argued that the industry needed to clean itself up.[29] This supports also offers an explanation for his insistence that the PCA were not censors but self-regulators. Breen spoke of the Code as something for which he was responsible, taking the disregard studio executives and personnel had for it personally, and separating talk of the Code from talk of censorship.

Quigley was a broker between the Catholic clergy and the Hays Office. When Quigley was invited to serve on the New York Archdiocese's Council of the Legion of Decency, Quigley

[28] Doherty (2007) makes a compelling case that Breen's anti-Semitic was limited to moments of frustration, and that as anti-Semitism became a public concern during the late 1930s Breen rallied around causes that supported Jewishness, such as the Committee of Catholics to Fight Anti-Semitism. "Of course, Breen did display anti-Semitism in his letters of the early 1930s; but he did not embody it, and, well before the outbreak of WWII, he vehemently opposed it, in public statements in the press and private correspondence" Doherty argues (2007: 212). While it is important to note Breen's later public stance against anti-Semitism, racism also operates in more subtle and subversive manners. This more nuanced conceptualization of racism and anti-Semitism is missing from Doherty's clearance of Breen from any continued prejudice against his Jewish colleagues beyond his moments of frustration.

[29] Though there are a few examples of rabbinical leaders who sent letters of support to the Legion's organizers, the action was directed and executed by Catholic clergy.

wrote to Hays and asked his opinion.[30] Hays replied, thanking Quigley for informing him

of the invitation, and concluding:

> "I have given careful thought to your inquiry as to whether or not in my judgment you should accept this invitation under all the circumstances, and I am very certain, indeed, that you should do this. Your knowledge of the whole matter and your interest and high purpose in it all, make it very desirable from every standpoint that you aid in this way."[31]

Earlier that year, Quigley wrote to Breen and recounted a meeting with Hays about the

state of Catholic action against the motion pictures. He wrote:

> "I had an extended talk with Will Hays on Wednesday. Among other things, he told me - with a straight face - that he had been considering endorsing the Catholic campaign for clean pictures. He says that he hopes it will be successful in eliminating dirty pictures and he says, further, that because of the reputation for fair dealing of these authorities he is sure no general harm will be done to the business. He tells me that, privately, he thinks the campaign is a good thing, but that officially he is telling his people that if it goes on it may destroy the business."[32]

It is interesting to note that Hays, a notable member of the Protestant community,

supported the work of Catholic pressure groups, using it to threaten member studios in the

MPPDA. While my consultations with the Hays Papers did not reveal any explicit anti-

Semitism, it is possible Hays also harbored such sentiments towards the employees of the

MPPDA's member studios. Hays and Quigley maintained cordial relations throughout the

1930s and 1940s, complicating the question of what sort of influence Catholic opinions

had on the limits of moral lassitude in Hollywood's products. When Hays left the MPPDA

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[30] In April of 1934, the Episcopal Committee on Motion Pictures of the Catholic Church of the made public its decision to take start a nation-wide crusade against the declining morality of the movies. This crusade took the shape of the National Legion of Decency, an organization of clergy across the country who viewed and rated films for decency from the perspective of the Church. While they lauded quality films, they also blacklisted harmful ones, giving such films a condemned rating and urging those in their parishes not to attend them.

[31] Quigley Papers, Hays to Quigley, 4 December 1934, box 1, folder 6.

[32] Quigley Papers, unsigned letter to Breen, 30 March 1934, box 1, folder 3. While the letter discussed is unsigned, its tone matches other correspondence between the two men.

in 1945, he wrote Quigley a sincere note informing him of his resignation and thanking him for his help over the past 25 years.[33] In so doing, he noted their common interests as helping the industry partake in self-regulation and maintaining freedom of expression.

Before Breen's appointment with the PCA, Quigley often wrote letters to the office, arguing that specific titles were in violation of the Code he had helped pen. These letters were sent on the official letterhead of his exhibitors trade publication, the *Motion Picture Herald*, adding complexity to the position Quigley occupied and the capacities in which he interacted with the industry. Noting the titles deemed to be beyond the pale of the Code and his conviction that they be branded as such, Quigley often added that he would wait until a response came from the PCA (also referred to as the Hays Office) before taking further action. What that further action was comprised of was never quite specified, but it is plausible to conclude that it would either have to do with the publication of his opinions on the *Motion Picture Herald*, or some communication with the Catholic leadership.[34]

The Catholic clergy involved in the efforts to clean the screen of salacious pictures articulated a coherent stance, one they shared with the PCA and the MPPDA. Opposed to legislation or federal censorship of the pictures, they wanted to impress upon Hollywood the responsibility they felt the industry owed to its public. The clergy thus viewed its work as that of vigilant observation, by maintaining a constant pressure on the industry to hew

[33] Quigley Papers, Hays to Quigley, 22 September 1945, box 1, folder 6.

[34] See for example Quigley to Hays, 6 March 1931, *Illicit* PCA file, MHL.

to the boundaries of decency, defined in part by the revamped Code and in part by the box office. The moral responsibilization of the industry by the clergy is a recurring theme in their correspondences and official statements throughout the 1930s-40s. In a statement presented at the 1935 National Catholic Welfare Council, the Episcopal Committee on Motion Pictures clarified its position as such:

> "The Episcopal Committee, from the beginning, felt that in protecting the public from offensive motion pictures reliance was not to be placed upon censorship and the control of trade practices by legislation, or any other seeming short cut to a clean and wholesome screen … the industry itself should be made to realize its duty to the public and the necessity of discharging that duty not only in a negative way, by not offering films calculated to lower the moral standards of the people, but in a positive way by producing only clean and wholesome pictures."[35]

These sentiments were echoed in an undated draft of a report, one that was likely authored by Quigley on behalf of the clergy. Speaking about the Legion's decision not to support Congressional bills targeting the distribution and exhibition practice of block booking, the report argues that, "the elimination of evil at the actual source of the production of motion pictures" is the most sensible path to bringing about a wholesome screen, as opposed to being, "concerned with legislative efforts against an industry trade practice which if eliminated would tend to transfer *accountability* for the character of motion pictures from the relatively few large producers to some fourteen thousand exhibitors of motion pictures scattered throughout the country" (emphasis added).[36] This concern with locating and maintaining responsibility on the industry itself, as opposed to Congress, individual exhibitors across the country, or the patrons of the pictures, is the cornerstone of the Catholic pressure on Hollywood.

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[35] Quigley Papers, Bishop's Statement, 12 March 1935, box 1, folder 31.

[36] Quigley Papers, undated typewritten report, box 1, folder 31.

While Quigley and Breen were concerned that the press not characterize them as having too much an influence on the industry, they did not necessarily perceive themselves as being influential. Writing to Breen in 1939 Quigley warned Breen about an attempt to overthrow the PCA.[37] "It has become entirely plain to me that an organized effort is being made to give you, and what you stand for in the Code work, a battle," Quigley wrote. "Apparently, the intention at this point is not to charge you with any wrongdoing, except on the point of going beyond your allotted sphere. This, of course, will be coupled with the assertion that you have done so in attempting to serve Catholic interests."[38]

Yet Van Schmus characterized the Legion as more of an external player in the later years of the office's existence. Speaking about Breen's relationship to the Legion, he states:

> "Well, it's not so much that he [Breen] didn't want anything to do with them. Occasionally, they would come out and they'd be a guest, at our office, or at lunch or something like that. He was very cordial to them. But I never heard him say anything that indicated that he was afraid of them or was dominated by them. He was his own man, really, in my opinion" (underline in original).[39]

Continuing on the topic, he recalled how when he first landed the job at the PCA, his friend and new colleague at the PCA Eugene Dougherty commented to him, "It's too bad you're not a Catholic." This does not escape the attention of Van Schmus's interviewer, Hall, who asked him to elaborate on the matter:

> "Hall: So then if he [Breen] felt that in his office, he and the rest of the staff just needed to do what

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[37] Indeed, Quigley's papers reveal a streak of paranoia against various segments of the industry over the years. How well-founded these concerns were is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

[38] Both quotes are from the Quigley Papers, Quigley to Breen, 30 January 1939, box 1, folder 3.

[39] Van Schmus (1993), p100.

was right, without really kowtowing to the Legion of Decency, then why would Dougherty feel it was important to hire a Catholic?

Van Schmus: Because the Code was really structured so that its fundamental morality was Catholic morality. He [Dougherty] was worried that it <u>takes</u> a Catholic to interpret that, the document itself, the strict morality that the Catholic Church stood for. But he kept telling me I could do it. (Laughs) He was very encouraging, but he said, "I have to be honest with you, I think that's what a member of the staff <u>needs</u> to have. They've got to understand the kind of morality."

Hall: So he felt that there was something Catholic about the idea behind the Code, that it wasn't just a general morality but that it was a Catholic...

Van Schmus: Yes, absolutely" (underline in original).[40]

Van Schmus explained how, while he had no personal dealings with the Legion, other

PCA employees did. "[O]n occasion, I don't know how often, not very often, but on

occasion, they [colleagues at the PCA] would be asked by the distributing company to go

back and talk to the Legion, 'They're giving us a bad time on this picture,' you know," he

described. "And they would, and they'd try to negotiate some kind of a compromise

between the Legion and the picture maker, which probably involved editing of some

sort."[41]

 This recollection poses an interesting angle to the conviction maintained by Quigley that

editing was simply not censorship. When a distribution company, whose main objective is

to acquire the rights to a film and create a profit out of its exhibition, asked PCA

employees to intervene on their behalf with the Legion, the resulting "editing of some sort"

blurred the lines between self-regulation and censorship. Moreover, this reveals a fracture

in the moral authority of delineating where the boundaries for the movies might, providing

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[40] Ibid., p100-101.

[41] Both quotes ibid., p101.

an uncomfortable triangulation between between Catholic pressure, the industry's main

trade association, and distributors seeking to bring films to audiences. The question of

who maintained moral influence and authority over the industry is a question that resists

any straightforward answer. But, Van Schmus adds, "...he [Breen] was able to stand

<u>between</u> the Legion and the picture maker ... He got them [studios] to agree to control the

content of their movies in order to knock off the censor boards <u>and</u> calm down the

Catholic Church. That's really what his achievement was" (emphasis in original).[42]

The issue of Catholic influence is not a pedantic matter engaged in by researchers today,

but was also debated by industry members and observers at the time. When *The Hollywood*

Reporter accused the Code of being a product of Legion, Lord wrote a rebuttal (published in

Quigley's *Motion Picture Herald)*:

> "This Code was not to be an expression of the Catholic point of view. It was to present principles
> on which all decent men would agree. Its basis was the Ten Commandments, which we felt was a
> standard of morality throughout the civilized world. The Code was, in other words, merely the
> presentation of accepted morality to the entertainment field dominated by the motion pictures."[43]

Without irony, Lord positioned the Catholic point of view with the decency of all men,

again implying a minority status cast upon anyone who could not agree to or understand

such limitations (such as Jewish studio executives or producers). But this coupling of

Catholic morality with universal morality did not mean the Catholic clergy felt it was

entitled to an explicit influence over the industry. Archbishop of Cincinnati and founder

of the Legion of Decency John T. McNicholas denied claims such claims with the

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[42] Ibid., p101-102.

[43] "Production Code's a Product of the Industry," in *Motion Picture Herald*, 23 November 1946.

comment, "The Legion of Decency has no connection directly or indirectly with the Hays Organization. It is not to be identified with it ... [t]here is no Catholic group in the Hays organization nor in the motion picture industry."[44]

While it may be accurate to say there was no explicit Catholic group within the PCA, the clergy monitored the industry's production trends, keeping a pulse on Hollywood through Quigley. Sending Quigley a congratulatory note on the twelfth anniversary of his trade publication, Bishop Cantwell of Los Angeles and San Diego wrote, "It was your solicitude and your unflagging zeal that largely inspired a campaign that had such a successful issue in lifting the moral level of the moving pictures. It is few men that have the wisdom of associating the moral principles with industrial activities."[45] Other Hollywood lay Catholics in wrote to Quigley about developments in the Church, such as founding member of Universal Studios Robert H. Cochrane, who wrote to Quigley thanking him for an editorial about the decency campaign.

Catholic organizations certainly were monitoring the industry's production trends, even defending their right to do so. In a response to MPPDA President William Hays about the restructuring and strengthening of the PCA, McNicholas wrote:

> "It must be presumed that the right to review and to criticize a motion picture bearing the emblem of your approval cannot be restricted. In discharging its responsibility to the public by complying with the requirements of the moral code, the administration set up by your organization to regulate the character of motion pictures can and should be helped by reasonable criticism."[46]

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[44] "Archbishop, Refuting Shaw, Clarifies Status of Legion," in *Motion Picture Daily*, 16 September 1936.

[45] Quigley Papers, Cantwell to Quigley, 14 October 1935, box 3, folder 30, Georgetown University Library.

[46] Quigley Papers, McNicholas to Hays, 12 August 1934, box 1, folder 31.

Quigley cited his vigilant scrutiny over the industry's production trends as the reason why

things in Hollywood had taken a turn for the better. In a letter to McNicholas, Quigley

proudly reported that none of the films released that year by a member studio of the

MPPDA had received a condemned rating from the Legion. Quigley's "constant

watchfulness" and complete rejection of objectionable material was what had led to this

improvement - not the "moral quality of the material which is considered for production,"

which "shows no improvement" at all.[47] While there was some acceptance of the oversight

of the PCA among member studios, Quigley also reported many attempts to circumvent

the Code. "There remains, apparently, the greatest need for continuing vigilance, both

within the industry and also on the part of the theatre-going public."[48]

Industry insiders noticed the closeness between Quigley and the PCA/MPPDA. One

employee at Fox Film Corporation wrote to Quigley in support of his work, noting, "I drop

you this line merely to congratulate you on what has been accomplished by yourself and

Joe Breen. From where I sit it looks as though the new method of censorship within the

industry will be a success and that our business, instead of suffering by this whole

campaign, will benefit by it."[49] Congratulating Quigley *and* Breen together in the same

breath, this note linked the two men to the "Catholic clean-up of the motion picture

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[47] Quigley Papers, Quigley to McNicholas, 22 October 1937, box 1, folder 33.

[48] Ibid.

[49] Quigley Papers, Yorke to Quigley, 28 June 1934, box 3, folder 24.

business," signaling once again the perspective that it was the non-Catholic, or Jewish, presence in Hollywood that was responsible for cinematic filth and indecency.[50]

But it would be inaccurate to present Quigley as a constant critic of the industry and its members. In an early memo to his editorial staff at the *Herald*, Quigley outlined the position of the publication in relation to the industry, characterizing the *Herald* as a publication for the picture people. Individual producers could be criticized as being egotistical or immoral, but such negative traits were not to be associated with producers wholesale. Defining the motion pictures as art, entertainment and business, Quigley wrote:

> "It [the *Herald*] is unreservedly committed to the Code of Morals for Motion Picture Production and to promoting in every conceivable manner the ideals expressed in that Code. It stands unqualifiedly against the introduction into motion pictures of any material whatsoever which, on moral grounds, has not the approval of decent people. It is against pictures which are not decent moral character and it will oppose and denounce any producer who persists in making product which does so transgress the laws of common decency."[51]

Despite his concerns for decency, Quigley was still a supporter of the motion picture industry. So long as the laws of common decency were understood and abided by in Hollywood, Quigley found no reason to hamper or crimp the motion picture industry. But the moment a producer overstepped these boundaries, they were subject to lambasting by the *Herald*, and any further action that could be taken by one of Quigley's associates. For Quigley, the laws of common decency were synonymous with Catholic morality, and his insistence that the industry regulate its output itself rather than be subject to legislative

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[50] Ibid.

[51] Quigley Papers, memo to editorial staff of *Motion Picture Herald*, 19 January 1931, box 3, folder 17.

censorship was a perspective he shared with the head of the PCA, the head of the MPPDA, and the Catholic clergy. While it may be going a step too far to position the PCA as a mere follower of Rome, there were overlaps in how Catholic pressure groups and the PCA articulated cinematic filth as being embodied in the Jewish producer, and their attribution of moral responsibility to clean up the industry's products by stereotyped studio employees.

2.4) Regulators in Hollywood, Censors in Albany

Aside from its relationships with the Catholic clergy, the Production Code Authority also maintained relationships with censorship boards around the country. The PCA had a keen interest in their work, and political developments surrounding their legislative authority. In line with the MPAA's larger stance against censorship, the PCA's employees achieved a delicate balance between explicitly distinguished themselves from such censorship boards while also cultivating a constant attention to the actions and decisions made by such boards. Such knowledge was to be translated into suggestions, or specific edits, for studios, in order to spare them the run-in with the censors' moral limits later down the road. Examining relationships between the PCA and censorship organizations is key for understanding how the PCA was effective in regulating, or negotiating, morality with studios. Although the PCA preserved connections to censorship boards, the organization had a uniquely different logic supporting their calculations of moral repercussion, which led to a different telos in achieving morally appropriate media.

The Production Code Authority routinely took notice of decisions made by censors around the country. The office wrote and filed reports on the screening and censoring trajectory of every film it approved, referring to previous censorship decisions in correspondence with studio employees as a way of justifying their editorial demands. Specifically, the PCA maintained a record of the various territories involved in municipal or state censorship, e.g. New York, Ohio, Kansas, Chicago, Ontario, Alberta, Quebec, Australia, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania. Such reports were used to negotiate with studios for cuts demanded by the PCA, by informing studios of the reactions previous films had generated from censors across the country. The office also wrote to studios about their current releases, and the various reactions from censors regarding their morality. By acting as a buffer between censorship boards and the industry, employees at the PCA were constantly brokering the moral limits of media and narrative.

Knowledge of censorship boards decisions and boundaries were employed by the PCA in negotiations with studios while a film was still in production as well. In one typical back and forth between Breen and Jack Warner of Warner Bro's Studios, Breen warns that he is gravely concerned over some material that would need to be revised. Breen, or the PCA employee penning the letter, includes a list of problematic items, lines, shots, and cuts. In pencil next to each item someone at Warner Bro's checked off the items the studio decided to address, scribbling the word "DONE" next to them.[52] A few days later Breen's office writes back to Warner, informing him they have read the revised final script for the picture

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[52] Breen to Warner, July 23, 1934, The Firebird, Warner Bro's archive, University of Southern California (USC).

and that it "contains nothing objectionable from the point of view of censorship."[53] It's likely Breen felt he was warning member studios about what they had observed from political censor boards, rather than censoring a film himself.

Employees of the MPD were also sometimes poached by the SRC/PCA. Upon his resignation from the Studio Relations Council for a position with Fox Studios, the MPPDA brought in a Dr. Wingate, formerly the head of New York State's censor board. Wingate was an appealing candidate for the SRC, as he was thought to possess the mind of the censor, having been one himself. (This organizational overlap in knowledge complicates the stance adopted by the SRC and the PCA that their work was not censorship.) Although the PCA received the eliminations bulletins of the MPD, and even brought in previous censors there to work for them, the two organizations articulated cinema's moral repercussion differently. PCA employees were negotiators, whereas the MPD lacked the strategy of negotiation in its toolkit altogether. The MPD was either rejecting movies or passing them, with little room for shades of gray in its decision-making.

Strategies for censoring films at the PCA, on the other hand, evolved by predicting state board concerns on the one hand and negotiating with studios on the other. While state boards often worried about specific words or particular images, the PCA concerned itself with broader outlines of plot. The PCA was not necessarily focused on content, but with regulating the narrative structure of a picture and the emotions that were to be relayed onto the audience as a result, leading to the development of what they referred to as

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[53] Breen to Warner, July 30, 1934, The Firebird, Warner Bro's archive, USC.

"moral compensating values." While Lord wrote, "crime need not always be punished, as long as the audience is made to know that it is wrong," for the MPD some narratives were too strong to be shown, even if a protagonist *was* brought to justice at the end of a film.[54] (Though they also had a sense of moral compensating values in their work, as the next chapter will evidence.)

PCA employees watched movies for a specific telos. One MPPDA report noted, "[t]here might be another expert censorship for advisory purposes in this organization to help pick the suitable pictures for the foreign market [...] Cooperative marketing that would fit the peculiar circumstances of the moving picture trade would increase profits for the members as well as reduce overhead in each foreign country."[55] This suggestion of using cooperative marketing as a censorship strategy embodies the overall spirit of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association as a trade organization first and foremost, open to any new strategies that might increase overall revenue for its member organizations. They saw a benefit in censoring not for moralistic reasons per se, but for box office reasons. While figures like Breen were not necessarily keen on protecting box office first and foremost, Breen and other like-minded PCA employees also understood that it was the economic logic that yielded the most cooperation from studios when it came to fulfilling the PCA's required editing comments.

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[54] Quoted in Black (1996), p40.

[55] Will Hays Papers, part 1, reel 43, unsigned typewritten report, possibly written by Hubert Work.

Despite these differences in telos and moral responsibility, the PCA maintained

relationships with the MPD throughout the post-WWII period. When the PCA adopted a

new version of the Code in 1955, then-director of the MPD Hugh Flick wrote to the

Advertising Code Agency of the MPAA, asking for six copies of the new Code as they

would be "sincerely appreciated."[56] Earlier that month, Flick also wrote to Arthur DeBra,

of the MPAA's Community Service Department, asking for a copy of their annual report,

as so they may be distributed to the board of regents as well as they would be helpful "for

the education and the edification of the staff of this Division," adding, "I sincerely hope

that we may be able to get together in the not too distant future."[57]

Flick also maintained cordial relations with Geoffrey Shurlock, Breen's successor at the

PCA. Pointing again to the connection between the industry and the PCA, Shurlock had

previously been employed at Fox Studios, where he was the successor to a man named

Lamar Trotti. Trotti was a screenwriter, who had previously been employed at the SRC

before turning to Fox. Shurlock worked under Breen for several years, before agreeing to

act as the head of the PCA while the MPAA searched for a more permanent replacement.

Judging from their correspondence, Shurlock and Flick were something of collegial

acquaintances. In one exchange Shurlock thanked Flick for his letter, and confirmed that

their recent visit was a mutual pleasure, adding that he was very much impressed by Flick's

staff. He adds that he has read a copy of a lecture Flick gave in Ann Arbor the previous

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[56] New York State Education Department Archives (MPD from hereon), series A1428, folder 2, unsigned letter to Gordon White, 7 March 1955.

[57] MPD, series A1428, folder 2, Flick to DeBra, 1 March 1955.

summer, writing, "[y]our arguments directed to the basic necessity for some method of guiding motion picture production along the most successful and most wholesome lines, were very cogent and of course very impressive to anyone connected with *our* activities" (emphasis added). Shurlock closed with an invitation, informing Flick he was welcome on the coast, and might attend any staff meeting he should wish.[58]

Breen also communicated with Flick. Sending a congratulatory farewell note to Breen upon the announcement of his retirement, Flick wrote, "No one who has not labored in this judicial area can fully appreciate the trials and tribulations of the task which you have so successfully accomplished."[59] Writing in response, Breen noted, "I think you are a witness well competent to testify in this general area, and because you are so well qualified to do so, I the more deeply appreciate what you write me."[60] These instances are evidence that despite the PCA's public and official denial of association with the word censorship, employees there felt more kinship with their counterparts at the Motion Picture Division of New York State than among studio executives and industry personnel. This professional geniality and attempt at communication between the industry and the censorship boards had been a part of the MPPDA's strategy since at least the 1930s. In an earlier example, then-MPD director Irwin Esmond wrote to Hays:

> "Recently I had the pleasure of a conference with your Mr. Hart which covered a wide field of problems and suggestions in relation to matters of interest concerning motion pictures. I am quite sure that these conferences, which, I understand, have been held with the other reviewing boards,

[58] MPD, series A1428, folder 2, Shurlock to Flick, 22 November 1954.

[59] MPD, series A1428, folder 2, Flick to Breen, 15 November 1954.

[60] MPD, series A1428, folder 2, Breen to Flick, 17 November 1954.

have proved and will continue to prove of mutual interest and helpfulness."[61]

That the PCA and the MPPDA/MPAA should wish to maintain such a level of polite communication between these organizations is not surprising, given the nature of their perspective on regulation as being to pre-empt any possible problems with censors experienced by studios. But that the censors spoke of a professional identification with the PCA, of "mutual interest and helpfulness," is more surprising. In another letter, Flick wrote to Eric Johnston (Hays' successor as head of the MPPDA in 1945):

> "My experience as Director of the Motion Picture Division in New York State has convinced me that *we are both striving for the same broad goal*, that is, to make motion pictures better than ever but, as you know, approximately half of the pictures which we process do not carry the Motion Picture Association Code Seal of approval. It is in these areas that many of our problems lie. Unrestricted exploitation of even a small portion of this fifty percent would be harmful to both the organized industry and the citizens of the State" (emphasis added).[62]

Perhaps it goes without saying that the PCA was situated in a different position to the industry than censors in the various state and municipal censorship boards scattered across the country. These organizations also differed in how they articulated the problem of morality in media, and how they attempted to persuade or incentivize industry members to change Hollywood production habits. While both found the industry problematic, the articulation of this moral responsibility was different between the PCA and the MPD for example, one mixing economic and moral incentives while the other was limited to simply rejecting a film from exhibition within the board's geographical purview (and thus also relied on a strong enough presence to enforce such a ban within their region). Despite these differences, they felt a kinship with one another that is evidenced over the years in

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[61] MPD, series A1428, folder 2, Esmond to Hays, 24 May 1933.

[62] MPD, series A1428, folder 2, Flick to Johnston, 10 September 1952.

letters between different heads of the MPD and the PCA, the criss-crossing of careers across these organizational spaces, and the sense of foreshadowing that soon their work would be rendered useless should exhibitors continue to show films that lacked the industry's seal of approval. Such concerns would prove more right than wrong by the end of the 1960s, as will be discussed in the final section of this chapter.

2.5) An Uneasy Relationship between Studios and the Production Code Authority

What were the characteristics of relations and interactions between the Production Code Authority and member studios, and how was moral authority embedded in this correspondence? This section will examine this question by way of direct correspondence between studios and the PCA. The PCA maintained constant relations with member studios, focusing their communication on the story and production elements of a film. While Joseph Breen embodied moral authority itself in his interpretations of the Code and thus the appropriate moral limits of cinematic narrative, he also knew that emphasizing the moral responsibility he felt the industry needed to assume was not how to sell the PCA's demands to the studios. Thus, the logic of avoiding deleterious moral repercussions on audience members was embedded in this correspondence, but was not made overly obvious by the PCA, as Breen repeatedly referred to their work as self-regulation rather than censorship. Here I will present instances of such correspondence, highlight the language used in the PCA's attempts to achieve a morally inflected, self-regulation in Hollywood.

"You will have in mind that we are on trial as far as a large part of the vocal public is concerned and their decision as to whether or not they will allow us to run our own business or will lend their support to the enactment of legislation which will entirely limit our activities, depends largely upon how they believe we live up to our own promises," wrote Hays's representative Jason Joy to Darryl Zanuck, a Warner Bro's executive.[63] This particular letter is a personal one, which indicates that Joy and Zanuck were more friendly than purely professional in a sense, as Joy made reference to an accompanying, more formal letter, that would state the same things. Joy's career path is an example of the incestuous nature of the Studio Relations Council and their relations to other Hollywood studios. Joy first came to Hollywood as Hays's West Coast representative, where he was first Director of Public Relations for the MPPDA (1922-1926), and then moved on to become the head of the Studio Relations Committee (1926-1932). After a decade with the MPPDA he joined Fox Studios as an executive and scenario editor, and then returned to public relations for Twentieth Century-Fox in 1935.

There is evidence that, before Breen insisted on the word self-regulation, employees at the SRC felt that what they were doing was a form of pre-censorship. "Mr. Charles Logue, the Scenario Editor, and Mr. Asher of Universal Studio invited me to sit in with them to discuss the censorship probabilities having to do with their proposed treatment of *East is West*," Joy noted. "To this end, Mr. Wilson and I have made a number of suggestions

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[63] Joy to Zanuck, 6 August 1930, *Illicit* PCA file, MHL.

which will be incorporated in their first rough draft scenario."[64] Here Joy openly refers to

the work of the SRC as simultaneously a discussion of censorship probabilities and

suggestion making. Similarly, a later head of the SRC once received a short note from

Zanuck thanking him for his "recent letters on the standpoint of official censorship [of]

our scripts … Your suggestions have been carefully noted and we shall endeavor to follow

them as closely as possible."[65] The organization did not do the work of censorship

themselves then, but foreshadowed what censorship offices around the country might

potentially disapprove of in a film script. Despite this slight nuance and the later change of

language when the Studio Relations Council became re-established as the Production Code

Authority, industry members thought of this office as one full of censors more often than

not.

Hollywood studios were certainly paying attention to changes in the office, taking special

notice of the re-tightening of the Code and Breen's appointment as the head of the PCA.

Studio archives are full of stapled copies of the "Hays Code," sent to all relevant personnel

such as producers, directors, and writers. One particularly sarcastic memo was addressed

from the "Office of The Censor to All Associate Producers and Directors" at Universal

Studios, or rather from the assistant general manager there. It stated, "Please be advised we

are informed by the Hays Association that insofar as possible women in all motion pictures

shall be clothed. The exposition of nudity or flimsy lingerie will surely be deleted by the

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[64] Col. Joy's resume, 27 May 1930, *East is West* PCA file, MHL.

[65] Zanuck to Wingate, 9 March 1933, *Heroes for Sale* PCA file, MHL.

Hays Office, in the first instance, and the various censorship boards thereafter. Please be guided accordingly."[66] This memo, from Harry H. Zehner, was both sarcastic and a cautionary directive to studio employees. In another letter regarding the arrival of Breen in Hollywood, Zehner wrote to the staff at Universal Pictures:

> "There is no use referring to pictures made by other companies, such as *She Done Him Wrong - Picture Snatchers*, etc. and say, 'See what they got away with - we can do the same.' There is a 'new deal' in censorship, so far as the Hays Association is concerned, and it means they are going to be more rigid with the enforcement of the Code. This attitude is already evidenced in the letters we are now receiving from them on scripts. Prior to this time, we were told 'it is recommended, etc.', but recently letters definitely state, 'it is inadmissible, etc.' or something equally definite.
>
> "In closing, I would suggest to the writers that they do not write into scripts scenes which will be deleted under the Code, both on account of the effect upon the release print continuity and also on account of the general economic conditions existing in the industry at the present time. It is imperative these matters bed considered from the inception of the idea in connection with the writing of the first script - so as not to lose the 'feel' of the final result."

Zehner signed the memo as, "Harry H. Zehner, Censor."[67] It is important to point out that Zehner, a studio employee, combined economic and material justifications for implementing the requirements of the new Code into their work. He also nodded to a "feeling" for the final result that should not be botched if it could be avoided. But none of these reasons are remotely concerned with the moral limits of the movies, or their effects on audiences. Of course, the "new deal" Zehner referenced was none other than Joseph Breen.

Rather than wait to submit their scripts for review, some studio executives decided to write directly to the PCA, requesting their opinions on stories before they developed them into

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[66] "Office of The Censor," 20 July 1934, William Wyler Papers, MHL.

[67] Zehner to Wyler, 26 May 1933. William Wyler Papers, MHL.

scripts. Irving Briskin, a producer at Columbia Pictures, wrote, "We contemplate doing a remake on a story called *Brothers* which was first made by the studio some years ago. Censorship limitations have been considerably narrowed since that time and we would ask you to kindly review the story, which we enclose, giving us a general idea of your objections."[68] Highlighting the ways in which the remake would be different - the studio planned to scrupulously erase any mention of the principal character's drug addiction, and a problematic murder would be treated in a way that avoided gruesomeness. He added, "Our purpose in asking you to cover this old version is to obtain a reply from you which will guide us as to whether or not we should, and could, make this picture over and receive a certificate from you, and of course *we do not care to put any writing expense on the story until we receive your opinion*" (emphasis added).[69]

Briskin's letter attests to the authority the PCA, and Breen in particular, presented in Hollywood, as the studio's solicitation of the office's opinion before putting any expenses into re-developing the story indicates. Also important to note is the emphasis on story or narrative elements in Briskin's letter, perhaps an attempt to appeal to Breen's self-image as non-censors, or story consultants. Breen responded promptly, noting that the PCA could approve of such a story so long as the studio did a thorough scrubbing out of all the drugs in the story's previous iteration. Breen also warned that the depiction of the doctors, important characters in a film that depicted the separation of twins at birth in order to get

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[68] Briskin to Breen, 3 March 1941, *Brothers* PCA file, MHL.

[69] Ibid.

at the question of nature v. nurture, be changed. He suggested altering the plot to feature

an adoption agency that unintentionally gives the boys away to different homes, as opposed

to an intentional separation of the twins by the doctors. In Breen's iteration, hospital

doctors observe this mix-up and remark that it will be interesting to observe the results,

rather than deliberately creating the situation for the sake of an experiment. Depicting it

otherwise would put the medical profession in a "rather callous and unsympathetic

showing," Breen warned.[70]

In a letter to a fellow PCA employee, Breen wrote:

> "I am looking at pictures morning, noon and night until I am almost frantic. It goes without saying
> that we have found it necessary, in many instances, to change a piece of dialogue in scenes or
> sequences. So far, so good. We have noted a disposition on the part of the studios to do the right
> and proper thing. Our difficulty comes by way of the task of convincing them that that which we
> seek to have them do is the right and proper thing."[71]

This letter attests to the frantic pace of work at the PCA, and the difficulties in

communicating with the studios as Breen perceived them. As a matter of routine, the PCA

evaluated scripts that were in development and conveyed their findings to respective

studios. The expectation was that studios would make necessary amendments before going

into production on a film, thereby eliminating potential opportunities for censorship

boards to meddle with a finished film. These suggestions were written as editorial

comments rather than strict elimination demands. But Breen noted that persuading

studios about what was "right and proper" was the most difficult of them all. This

difficulty arose in part because of the different logics operating in these interactions. The

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[70] Breen to Briskin, 4 March 1941, *Brothers* PCA file, MHL.

[71] Breen to Hart, 28 July 1934, *Nell Gwynne* PCA file, MHL.

PCA was always concerned with the qualities of "right and proper"-ness first, while the studios were interested in maximizing box office first, foremost and always.

The PCA's "right and proper" logic is evidenced in the PCA's standardized correspondence with studios regarding script evaluations. In a letter to Warner Bro's regarding a script, Breen wrote, "We recommend handling this scene of the girls pulling their clothes off so as to avoid any over-exposure," and, "We suggest modifying the line 'You took a shot at him'." In another instance he warned, "It is possible that the blunt line 'Get your clothes off' may be censorable, and we suggest omitting it, as the succeeding action carries the story."[72] While the "right and proper" logic was obviously concerned with movie morality and the moral repercussions of the movies, this underlying logic was not how the PCA presented their standard decisions to studios. Rather than discuss any potential harmful moral repercussions on viewers, the PCA presented their demands as time and cost saving measures that the studios should take.

Such examples also evidence how the PCA employed their knowledge of what a censorship office might take issue with, gleaned from their correspondence with censorship offices around the country (see the preceding section). Not every studio felt the PCA was a resource in avoiding moral and economic troubles further down the line, and not every request or suggestion the PCA made was taken up. Yet this material points to a form of inter-organizational dependence. As the PCA made suggestions that were based in part on

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[72] All quotes in Breen to Warner, 11 May 1934, *Kansas City Princess* PCA file, MHL.

Catholic proclivities and in another part on the knowledge of censorship decision trends, the organization formed something of a filter between the censors and the industry.

The organization (referred to here as the Hays office), even figured into F. Scott Fitzgerald's unfinished novel about life on the Hollywood lot, *The Last Tycoon*. In this scene, the novel's protagonist, Monroe Stahr (based on real-life film producer Irving Thalberg), is in a conference with a team of writers about a stagnant film.

> "What do you think of the girl?" asked Stahr
>
> "Well - naturally I'm prejudiced in her favor."
>
> "You better forget it," said Stahr warningly. "Ten million Americans would put thumbs down on that girl if she walked on the screen. We've got an hour and twenty-five minutes on the screen - you show a woman being unfaithful to a man for one-third of that time and you've given the impression that she's one-third whore."
>
> "Is that a big proportion?" asked Rose slyly, and they laughed.
>
> "It is for me," said Stahr thoughtfully, "even if it wasn't for the Hays office. If you want to paint a scarlet letter on her back it's all right but that's another story. Not this story."[73]

After his success as a novelist, Fitzgerald, like many other successful writers, was invited to come to Hollywood and write screenplays. Although Fitzgerald floundered there, his first-hand observations found their way into much of his writing. In this fictional instance, the producer Stahr sees *kinds* of stories, arguing this particular story was not of the kind where a woman could portray a sex worker without raising difficulties with the PCA. This offers insight into how studios potentially approached the development of their scripts before sending them to the PCA for their evaluation.

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[73] Fitzgerald (1994), p40-41.

Though Breen assumed the role of moral authority among industry personnel, the PCA was losing grip over its claims presenting moral reason at work, as changes in the social context of cinema-going, the cultural shifts in moral boundaries among the burgeoning youth culture, and the legislative weakening of censorship attest to. While the PCA did not officially discuss morality with studios in their correspondence with them, other documentary evidence presented above points to the concern for protecting viewers from smut, a form of filth which in some instances was directly attributed to studio employees, especially Jewish ones, themselves. As Van Schmus recalled, scripts were assigned to readers at the PCA based on the content of the material, with "tougher" or more sensitive films being assigned to readers who had connections with that studio. This tradition stayed on at the PCA even after Breen retired in 1954, and highlights the importance of maintaining contacts between studio employees and the PCA. Turning the discussion to the slow disintegration of the PCA and self-regulation in the industry, I will highlight how concerns with protecting viewers from harmful moral repercussions was worked around by studios and individual filmmakers, and eventually reiterated by the PCA in the form of the Classification and Ratings Administration.

2.6) Slips in Control at the Post-WWII Production Code Authority

The period between 1946 and 1961 bears evidence of the two largest contextual shifts in Hollywood, both of which threatened its much-coveted box office. This includes the introduction and rise of household television ownership, and investigations by the Department of Justice regarding the oligarchic vertical structure of the industry

(culminating in the 1948 Supreme Court finding known as the "Paramount Decision," whereby studios were forced to divest from their theatrical holdings). It is estimated that box office revenues dropped by 43% during this time period.[74] By highlighting the narrative elements of two films which are credited with bucking the system, this section will point to changing conceptualizations of audiences, from mass audience to niche markets, in 1960s Hollywood. This changing conceptualization is key in the industry's eventual move from regulation to ratings, as the ratings system literally segments audiences into age- and morally-based categories. Before discussing *Alfie* and *Blow-Up,* I will provide some detail on the administrative and cultural changes taking place in the PCA during this time period, most noticeably with the resignation of Joseph Breen from the helm of the organization.

While one narrative of the film industry maintains that the decision forced studios to divest themselves of their theater circuits, loosening up the economic concentration of the industry and allowing studios the space to begin experimenting with content, others argue television was the more responsible factor in the move away from production ideal of wholesome family entertainment. What opened up the American market to foreign and independent producers was not the studio's loosened grip on exhibition, but rather the dramatic reductions in production budgets, which was forced by the reduction in box office from the competition of television. Television also lowered viewers' demands for wholesome family entertainment, as there was ample entertainment offered by the glowing box in the living room corner (see Ayer et al., 1970).

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[74] See Wyatt (2004), especially p66, and Lewis (2000) for more on this topic.

In his oral history, Van Schmus recounts how Breen flat out prohibited some topics no matter how they were treated, such as abortion, sexual perversion (parlance of the time for homosexuality), and drug usage. Some of these prohibited topics conflicted with Catholic sensibility, while others (such as drug use) were condemned by government organizations (such as the Federal Bureau of Narcotics). Van Schmus also recalled that Geoffrey Shurlock, who stepped in when Breen's health led him to retire in 1954, argued any subject could be depicted on the screen, so long as it was treated well. "The administrator of the production code, Geoffrey Shurlock, has stated in an article published some time ago that the code is being applied on a more lenient basis than previously," an editorial in Quigley's trade publication questioned.[75] This signified a shift in the direction of the PCA, from a time when things were explicitly labeled taboo to a perspective in which a tolerance for, if not an encouragement of, subtle and delicate treatments of sensitive topics was acceptable. Discussed in more detail below, it would be shortsighted to conclude such lenience was the result of personal opinion over a shrewd examination of the social context and competitive forms of entertainment of the time.

While some producers and other industry members continued to cling to the pre-WWII maxim that a failure to maintain family standards would yield less box office, perspectives were shifting at the PCA as well. Shurlock did not carry the connections to Catholics organizations and outlooks that Breen had cultivated throughout his life and career. Another name long-associated with the Motion Picture Association of America (the new

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[75] "…enforcing the Code??" in *Motion Picture Herald,* 22 August 1959. MPD, series A1428, folder 1.

and shortened name of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America) had

also been replaced, when Will Hays retired in 1945 and Eric Johnston took his place as

head of the trade association. Johnston did not carry the burden of needing to quickly

"clean up" the industry in order to quell civic and other pressure groups, a pressure which

had defined the position Hays was recruited to occupy in 1922. Both of these

replacements signal the shifting concerns of the trade organization and the industry it

represented in the larger social context of American, and global, cinema audiences.

Though the industry's parameters were changing, the PCA and the MPAA tried to

maintain some grip on production standards, even as they were slipping from the

organization's grasp. The mythos that the work of these organizations was far from

censorship was also maintained. In an address over dinner at the Beverly Hills Hotel, the

new MPAA president Eric Johnston stated, "The good picture is our guarantee of freedom

of the screen ... Censorship, of course, might insure clean pictures, but they could be clean

and still be stupid and insane. Any kind of censorship is dangerous to the liberties of a

free people."[76] While Johnston did not address how one might obtain good pictures if not

by censoring the bad ones, his comments signal a continuance of the older organizational

insistence that the organization's work was not censorship.

Studio personnel were aware of the cultural changes surrounding the industry. Some were

careful to speak about them in a way that did not render the work of the PCA useless, even

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[76] "Film Code's Value Cited by Johnston," in *Citizen News*, 20 June 1946. See the subject file, "Production Code (- 1949)" at the MHL.

if they offered some criticism about the organization. Gradually, the notion of multiple audience types was coming to be seen as financially sensible, as the growing television audience continued to subsume the mass audience concept. Speaking about the success of the 1946 British film adaptation of Shakespeare's *Henry V*, United Artists producer David Selznick argued the film "proves what a good many of us have wanted to have proved for years – that a special kind of picture can be produced for a special audience. That's progress."[77] But Selznick was also quoted as harboring concerns about the lack of production restrictions on foreign films and what this could mean for the foreign box office of American films. "Foreign producers have no Code to restrict them in their choice of subject matter, and therefore they can present some material we cannot. This may give them some advance in those areas," he stated.[78] He also expressed the belief that the Code needed to be revised, but not done away with entirely. Essential morals don't change, he suggested, but some customs and traditions do, requiring updates to the Code so as to stay relevant to the times. Though the Code was revised a decade later, in 1956, there were other ways the Code was reinforced. For example, many titles released in the period between 1928-1947 were denied a certificate for reissue, as the PCA found they had become unsuitable for exhibition.[79]

In response to the claim that the Code was risking becoming outdated, Shurlock stated:

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[77] "Selznick Lauds Production Code," in *Motion Picture Herald*, 22 June 1946, p33.

[78] Ibid.

[79] "MPA Strengthens Code on Titles and Crime Films" *Motion Picture Herald*, 6 December 1947. See the subject file, "Production Code (- 1949)" at the MHL.

"...it's precisely this type of thinking that will bring about this demise even faster than he [the hypothetical producer] fears. If he [the hypothetical producer] doesn't believe it, let him look at what happened to vaudeville. It used to be a medium of family entertainment. When it started slipping, they started spicing it up - and thus hastened its death. The same kind of thinking brought on the Code twenty years ago. Faced with a depression, the industry went in for more sensational material which, instead of helping, pretty nearly put an end to it by arousing public indignation, bringing the threat of censor boards all over the country and almost getting us Federal censorship!"[80]

Despite this insistence that the Code would stay put, throughout the 1950s and 1960s individual directors, producers and distributors began bucking the system in ways that exposed chinks in the PCA's authority. While such points of weakness had always been present, the contextual factors discussed above such as television and the decline in box office changed how these weaknesses were handled. One important piece of these changes is the role played by a handful of titles, such as *The Pawnbroker*, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, *Alfie*, and *Blow Up*, whose release and success were linked to the eventual overhaul of the Code, and the PCA. Some of these titles were released with the creation of a new label, "Suggested for Mature Audiences," which effectively created a new audience category as well as film category. Others were released by independent distributors, which were often tied to major distributors and thus independent only in name. These films pushed the boundaries of what had been previously acceptable, and there is little evidence that the mature audiences only label was strictly enforced.

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[80] "Jessel's Censure Just Not So, Censors Say; Code Officials Defend Deletion in Film as Protecting Industry and Audience" in unnamed paper. See the subject file, "Production Code (- 1949)" at the MHL. It is likely this article was published in 1956, as Jessel's film *Wait Till the Sun Shines, Nellie* was released in this year.

Alfie opens with a sequence of a tramp running through the streets of London, symbolizing the eponymous character (played by British actor Michael Caine). The dog happens upon a car with foggy windows. "Ahh," comes the sound of a man's voice, content. "Supposing a police was to come along?" a female companion asks. "Let him come! The windows are all steamed up, the doors are locked, it's like a Turkish bath in here," the man replies, jocular in tone. While the couple maneuver themselves in attempts to get dressed, the horn suddenly sounds. "Get your knee off the steering wheel!" the man cries. "I can't, I'm stuck," the woman replies flatly. "Here, let me do it," he says. Opening the driver's side door, the man, Alfie, emerges into the London night, ducking back in to add, "I told you before, be careful where you put your legs!" Arranging the zipper on his trousers, he finally notices the audience. "Hello!" he says with a surprise. Then, approaching the camera with a smirk he offers, "They never make these cars big enough do they?" Alfie goes on to instruct the audience about the differences between married and single women, pointing out that the woman in the car is married and that all married women need is a good laugh once in a while. But, he warns, don't make the single ladies laugh: "You get one of them laughing, you won't get nothing else!" Three minutes into the film, one can only imagine the stunned reactions of Breen, Quigley, or the New York Motion Picture Division's censors.

While *Alfie* humorously pushed the boundaries around infidelity, and later in the film abortion as well, *Blow-Up* is often cited by film historians and critics as the title that drove the nail in the Code's coffin. In *The New York Times*, critic Bosley Crowther wrote, "It will

be a crying shame if the audience that will undoubtedly be attracted to Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up* because it has been denied a Production Code seal goes looking more for sensual titillation than for the good, solid substance it contains—and therefore will be distracted from recognizing the magnitude of its forest by paying attention to the comparatively few defoliated trees."[81] Also set in London, the film centers on a young hip fashion photographer who makes his way through the world mostly by impulse, toying with whatever woman happens to throw herself in front of him. When he finds himself with an unexpected morning off, he wanders into a London park and voyeuristically photographs a young woman necking and romancing with an older man. When the woman notices the photographer, she chases after him, demanding he hand over the roll.

As with *Alfie,* there was much for PCA regulators to find unacceptable in the picture well before its midway point. In the first of three photo shoots, the photographer was shown being authoritative and firm with a group of fashion models, seductive and provocative with a one model donning a shimmering cut-out shift smock, the sides of her torso fully exposed, and finally accepted a ménage-a-trois with two amateur models who appear unannounced at his studio. And it is not only in photo shoots that the photographer engages with women sexually. When the woman from the park finds the photographer's studio, she first tries asking politely to have the film roll back. When he doesn't yield, she opts for an alternative route of seduction, unbuttoning her blouse and smoking the marijuana the photographer offers her instead before repeating her demand.

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[81] "*Blow Up*," by Bosley Crowther, 19 December 1966, *The New York Times*, http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=EE05E7DF1739E361BC4152DFB467838D679EDE (accessed July 24, 2015).

By the 1960s, not only was there a new crop of movies, there was also a new crop of movie reviewers who heralded the arrival of a fresh, more liberal, free age, when the movies could be more expressive without constantly checking in with the censors. Reviewers like Roger Ebert joined the ranks of writers like Pauline Kael, Andrew Sarris, and Stanley Kauffmann, while the older, Bosley Crowthers of the world began to step out. Their reviews included snarky commentary on the movies and the morality they imposed – or that was imposed on them. Elaborating on the new generation of filmmakers, Kauffmann famously coined the term "the film generation." The movies of the 1950s were being enjoyed not by new audiences he argued, but by a new kind of audience. This audience wasn't merely enthusiastic about the movies; they had been born with them. This was "the first generation that has matured in a culture in which film has been of accepted serious relevance," Kauffmann wrote, "however that serious is defined."[82] Exemplifying a longer view on narrative morality, Ebert re-reviewed *Blow-Up* some thirty years after its release. "Parts of the film have flip-flopped in meaning," he wrote. "Much was made of the nudity in 1967, but the photographer's cruelty toward his models was not commented on; today, the sex seems tame, and what makes the audience gasp is the hero's contempt for women," Ebert deftly pointed out.[83]

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[82] Kauffmann (1975 [1966]).

[83] Both quotes from Ebert's review of *Blow-Up*, http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/great-movie-blow-up-1966 (accessed February 16, 2014).

Blow-up was "a sensation for its frank view of sex, drugs, and rock 'n roll in swinging

London," Richard Corliss wrote in an obituary for Antonioni, adding that the film, "helped

liberate Hollywood from its puritanical prurience."[84] In fact, despite the condemnation

from the PCA, or perhaps because of it, the film did very well at the box office, generating

a box office of $20 million (1966 USD). But its route to meeting audiences was a

circuitous one. When Shurlock denied *Blow-Up* a seal of approval, MGM (one of the trade

association's member studios) skirted this restriction by releasing the film through one of

their subsidiaries, named Premier Pictures, thereby also avoiding the fine member studios

were stuck with when distributing an unapproved film. Such box office success

exemplified the ways in which the PCA was out of date and out of touch, leading such

films to be cited as the reasons for the crumbling of the Code and the PCA's regulatory

control over major studio productions. Such box office success also confirmed the

suspicion that skirting older methods of content regulation did not necessarily imply box

office failure. "The solution was to rate rather than regulate," wrote one film historian

(Doherty 2007: 333).

2.7) From "Self-Regulation" to Ratings

Dubbed by the well-known film critic Stanley Kauffman as "the film generation," the

audiences were used to having both cinema *and* television in their lives, and were the key

element that transformed images on the screen into entertainment (Kauffmann, 1975).

The freer, younger cinema-goer came with new tastes. A "vastly changed

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[84] "When Antonioni Blew Up the Movies," 5 August 2007, Richard Corliss, *Time* magazine, http://content.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,1649984,00.html (accessed February 16, 2014).

audience" and "evidence of the broader society's changing values," are part of the narrative that explains how the Code was finally discontinued, and the ratings system established in its place (Monaco, 2001: 61). These changing demographics of movie-going audiences, and the rise of the American teenager (discussed in chapter 5) are cited as another nail driven in the PCA's coffin. Developments in the legal groundwork supporting legislative censorship were also relevant to the shift from regulation to ratings. As cinema acquired First Amendment freedom of speech protections, the legal grounds on which censorship by state and municipal censorship bodies rested were eroded via several court decisions in the 1950s and 1960s (Wittern-Keller, 2008). By discussing how these threads are woven together to explain the shift from censorship to ratings, I will conclude the discussion in this chapter surrounding the PCA and their relations to other organizations involved in the moral control of creating cinematic content, and the definitions of responsibility that were implied in such actions.

The steam behind the dismantling of the Code had been building before the 1960s. Indeed, instances of the special releases of titles, either with a "mature audience only" label or without a seal from the PCA, can be located throughout the 1950s. The auteur Otto Preminger released titles without the seal of approval, such as *The Moon is Blue* (1953), and *The Man with the Golden Arm* (1955). Earlier films such as *Miracle at Morgan's Creek* (1944) or *Gone with the Wind* (1939) also incited reams of paper and debate over the moral limits of the movies among PCA and studio employees, but were still released all the same (Leff,

1980).[85] "The desirability of adopting an audience classification system for motion pictures will be explored by the so-called Production Code working committee of the MPAA, it was learned at the week-end," reported one industry publication in 1959.[86] Later that same year, auteur Stanley Kubrick stated, "The Code has become the loose suspenders that hold up the baggy pants of the circus clown. It allows the pants to slip dangerously, but never to fall."[87]

Despite the changes in the Code's wording that were adopted in 1956, the Codes and Ratings Administration officially replaced the Production Code Authority in 1968 (the same body which administers the ratings system of G, PG, PG-13, R, and NC-17 today). These changes were affected by a new MPPDA president, another Catholic named Jack Valenti, who had big plans for the future of the industry in mind. Valenti, enticed by Hollywood to leave his position as an aide to President Lyndon B. Johnson, immediately embraced the argument that the Code was outdated and irrelevant, and introduced the idea of its overhauling in 1966. By 1968 the industry moved to the age-based classification scheme of the Green Sheet and FEBNO (discussed in chapter 6). In his oral history, Valenti's successor Richard Heffner characterized his predecessor as a man of absolutes,

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[85] Uttering one of the most famous lines in American cinema history, Rhett Butler (played by Clark Gable) informed the impossibly beautiful Scarlett O'Hara (Vivian Leigh) that, "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn." The last word of this sentence sparked dozens of pages of back and forth between studio members and PCA employees over its allowance.

[86] "PCA to Explore Audience Categories - Move to Look Into Idea Follows Introduction of Bill in New York State," *Film Daily*, 19 January 1959. MPD, series A1428, folder 1.

[87] "*Look* Mag Eyes Askew The Production Code," *Film Daily*, 15 September 1959. MPD, series A1428, folder 1.

who believed a movie was born a G, or born an X. Expressing how much he disagreed

with Valenti, Heffner explained, "A nipple is not always a nipple."[88]

While CARA's archives remain confidential, scholars have scrutinized and written about

the move from censorship to ratings. The restructuring of the PCA as the Classification

and Ratings Administration is characterized as self-preservation and product

differentiation, and many scholars of the transition characterize it as a very shrewd move

on the part of the industry given its circumstances. "In casting off the Code, Hollywood

traded up, exchanging its custodial stewardship and presumptive universality for greater

screen freedom and continued market domination," one scholar concluded (Doherty

2007, p335). "The CARA board continues to madden critics, filmgoers, occasionally even

the studios," argues another film scholar. "In the heat of a ratings controversy, we tend to

forget that the true measure of the rating system lies not in its treatment of specific scenes

in specific movies but in its maintenance of the larger network of relationships that form

the new Hollywood" (Lewis, 2000: p299 both quotes). Nodding to the immense amount

of forethought that went into the switch from censorship to ratings, preeminent film

historian Paul Monaco writes, "The entire issue of control over movie content, after all,

involved complex assessments as to what the public wanted or would tolerate, what parts of

society would object to changes in Hollywood's traditional standards, and just how to

proceed most efficaciously on behalf of an industry for which image and popular approval

were vital," (Monaco 2001, p59).

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[88] Heffner oral history, volume 1, session 2, p29. This is part of the Richard D. Heffner papers, Columbia University, Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

But with the shift from censorship to ratings came a tandem transfer of the burden of

moral responsibility from the production side of the industry to the exhibition side of the

industry. Valenti's success in lobbying theater owners and exhibitors around the country is

important to note in the restructuring of moral control over Hollywood's products and

their consumption. Filmmakers have also become responsibilized through their contracts

with studios before they begin official work on a film. "The rating system was designed

primarily to regulate entry into the legit film market," Lewis argues (2000, p40), going on

to note that the current logic of content regulation is by contract, as directors agree to

deliver a film with a certain classification before it is shot. While such stipulations are

written into directors' contracts, so too are exhibitors forced by contract not to show

movies that have received anything harsher than an R rating. Some theaters, especially

those in shopping malls, are sometimes limited to PG-13 titles and below.

The PCA, known as the industry's censors, spent the 1930s-1960s regulating the morality

of films produced for what was thought of as the mass audience, though they shrewdly did

this with mixed tones of economic reason thrown in. This chapter has discussed the

relationships the PCA maintained with other organizations, such as the Catholic clergy,

the industry's publishers, and censorship boards across the country. Ultimately, the

responsibility to maintain moral appropriateness was shifted onto exhibitors and viewers

themselves, as the industry began to accept smaller brackets of audiences in lieu of one

mass market. This was an important development in the transition from censorship to

ratings, which has refigured the mosaic of responsibility in screen cleaning efforts. This dissertation will go on to discuss how moral authority among viewers has its roots in early scholarship on communications and media, as well as a new brand of civic-minded media moralists today.

Chapter 3
The New York State Motion Picture Division and the Meaning Making Practices of Censors

"One of the unique attributes of the task of reviewing and evaluating motion pictures is that every picture presents an individual problem and although certain broad philosophies may be applicable, the peculiar properties of each delineation enforce individual considerations and evaluation. Such implications lend a professional character to the process of review."
– Motion Picture Division, Annual Report.[89]

3.1) Censorship in New York State

How the scales between entertainment and education ought to be balanced quickly

became, and remains, the central tension underneath attempts to censor, regulate, and rate

films across the 20th century and into the 21st. Here I will focus on the moral dangers of

cinema as discussed by a body of official state cinema censors, highlighting the different

images of audiences censors had in mind when rejecting or granting a film access to the

New York State market. Drawing connections between the moral dangers associated with

cinema and the individuals labeled susceptible, and conversely virtuous, this chapter

exemplifies that the controlling the boundaries of moral ambiguity was a particularly

difficult for bureaucratic censors, as any negotiations over the acceptable and unacceptable

filmic material could cost them their legitimacy to censor at all. These struggles are unique

to the work of those attempting to control cinematic content, where moral ambiguity is

viewed as a potential danger, rather than as a potential resource. This chapter also

provides an important comparative position for later discussions about parental and viewer

responsibilization in the transition from censorship to ratings.

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[89] Annual Report of the Motion Picture Division, April 1949-March 1950, New York State Education Department, New York State Historical Archives, Motion Picture Division collection, Series A1429, Box 4, Folder "Society to Maintain Public Decency (civic groups)." From hereon referred to as MPD.

Who was endangered by exposure to cinematic spaces and stories, and what was the moral texture of such dangers? Brewing underneath claims that a form of media is problematic are shifting social problems and changing social structures. The social crisis of cinematic representation has as much to do with cultural power and the cultural function of entertainment as with the control of cinematic content itself, if not more the former than the latter (Maltby 1993). Indeed, classification, audience suitability, age appropriate-ness, censorship, licensing for movies, and licensing for exhibitors were all important issues throughout the 20th century. Garland points out that "The problems to which moral panics respond may turn out to be serious, trivial, or a figment of the imagination – although the revealed extent of the problem usually bears little relation to the reaction it produces" (2008: 13).

In the first decade of the 20th century, a flurry of new motion picture theaters, or nickelodeons, began to attract new audiences of lower-class and immigrant populations. Legislative reform groups and other civic activist organizations deemed this population, not previously having been among the traditional theater-going types, and their exposure to such entertainments these populations, dangerous. Contemporary observers described these dangers as "a carnival of vulgarity, suggestiveness, and violence," or a "menace to the morals of the community and the healthy development of the social organism" described these dangers (Grieveson 2004: 4). One common concern from this period that has been reiterated in varying discourses over the past century is the link between the social forces of cinema and the overall health of that cinema-going society, as well as the physical health of

the individual viewer.[90] While Jane Addams referred to the cinema as a "mimic stage,"

another contemporary observer and psychologist J. E. Wallace Wallin used the harsher

term of "psychic infection."[91] In an extensive report following a theater fire, the *Chicago

Tribune* portrayed audiences as made up of impoverished immigrant families and their

children, "who formed the early stage of that dangerous second generation which is finding

such a place in the criminals of the city."[92]

How do censors evaluate slippery cultural objects, such as films, and arrive at moral

conclusions about them? This question raises the issue of interpretation and meaning

making practices in relation to cinema, and involves a consideration of the orientation

toward cinema that was fostered in the work of New York State censors. In addressing this

question through archival materials and censorship decisions of the New York State

Motion Picture Division (MPD), the state's movie censorship office, I argue censors saw the

telos of cinema as didacticism, forming a tool through which a better citizenry could be

formed. But it was this very persuasiveness that gave censors room for concern. The

analytical categories of filth, moral repercussion, responsibility, and telos are employed in

ways specific to the censors but comparable to the work of other control intermediaries

discussed in later chapters. Here I will highlight the way in which censors' responsibilized

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[90] For more scholarship on early cinema censorship and moral discourse see Janet Staiger's *Bad Women: Regulating Sexuality in Early American Cinema* (2005), and Tim Gunning's "From the Opium Den to the Theatre of Morality: Moral Discourse and Film Process in Early American Cinema," (*Art and Text 30,* 1988).

[91] See Grieveson 2004, especially chapter 1. See also Jane Addams' *The Spirit of Youth and the City Streets* (1909), and J. E. Wallace Wallin, "The Moving Picture in Relation to Education, Health, Delinquency and Crime," in *Pedagogical Seminary* 17, no 2 (June 1910).

[92] Quoted in Grieveson 2004, p12. See the *Chicago Tribune,* 15 April 1907, p1 for the entire report.

themselves, and how their moral interpretations foreclosed the ability for others to be responsibilized in any meaningful manner, including the parents of viewers and viewers in general. I will also indicate the ways in which moral repercussion was a double-sided concept for the censors, at once being read into the actions and plots of the movies as well as being expected as an outcome of movie viewership on audiences. In isolating and shielding their identity and interpretive processes from the general public, the MPD built an authoritative sense of responsibilization around their own positions, while preserving a sense of legitimacy.

Finally I will demonstrate that two archetypal spectators are repeatedly articulated in the evaluations of MPD censors: virtuous audiences, whose moral boundaries were the censors' own, and susceptible audiences, whose exposure to cinema could result in unknowable, and thus risky, outcomes. Rather than treat these audience registers as discrete viewer types, I argue these two viewers were implicated together. After offering some historical context on this office, this chapter will connect the decisions of MPD censors to the analytical framework by examining the insularity of the office and the work of the censors, and the relations the MPD maintained with other like-minded organizations. It will then move into a detailed discussion of the rejection sheets of the MPD, an overlooked yet invaluable archival source offering an in-depth look at the way censors thought about cinema, moral fitness, and model citizenship. Here, the texture of the moral dangers provided by cinema will be presented in detail, with an emphasis on the risks of exposure to content dealing with crime and criminality, sexuality and gender, and critiques of the

state. These citizen types will be tied to the concepts of moral ambiguity, filth, and telos. I will begin by discussing the historical importance and position of the Motion Picture Division.

3.2) Work and self-perception at 80 Centre Street

In existence from 1921-1965, the Motion Picture Division (MPD) was one of the most important and influential boards of censorship in the United States. The MPD was housed in the New York State Department of Education, and through their decisions to grant or deny licenses for projection they set informal moral standards for cinematic normalcy. Censors, or reviewers as MPD employees preferred to call themselves, viewed all motion pictures distributed to any commercial theater within the state and evaluated them for their compliance with the laws of the state (I will use the terms reviewer and censor interchangeably in this chapter). These reviewers, a position occupied mostly by a woman, were invested with the power to reject or allow a specific picture's exhibition in New York, and often beyond. In order to understand the attempts and arguments offered in curbing or widening the reach of motion pictures, the kinds of stories they could tell, and the audiences deemed appropriate for such stories, the context in which these reviewers were making their decisions becomes critical. How did those employed in this office understand their work and position? Here I examine the daily practices in the New York State Motion Picture Division (MPD) office in order to understand how censors understood their work, how the organization was positioned amongst other social hygiene and content control organizations, and the types of audiences embedded in the evaluations of the censors.

Figure 1) New York State censors ca. 1930. The seated man is then-Director of the Motion Picture Division, Irwin Esmond. The man on the right is Canadian actor Walter Pidgeon, and the man on the left is likely the field inspector, either Mr. Donnelly or Mr. Dermody.[93]

Prior to being housed in the Education Department, the MPD had existed in another institutional space as the Motion Picture Commission from 1921-1927. This previous bureaucratic office regulated and licensed all pictures shown in the State of New York, much like its successor. But this earlier body also had the ability to recommend laws to the state in order to facilitate the educational and recreational viewing of motion pictures, and recommend specific titles it found suitable for children. When the state's education law was amended in 1927, the Commission was re-established as the Motion Picture Division and shuffled along to the Education Department of the State of New York. With the move came a re-orientation to the issue of motion picture morality: where the Motion Picture Commission had the ability to suggest types of audiences for types of motion

[93] http://moviehistory.us/censoring-americans-movies.html (accessed March 2, 2015).

pictures, the explicit labeling of films by audience types disappeared. The new MPD evaluated motion pictures for their appropriateness for *all* potential audiences. Yet I do not intend to suggest that the MPD did not still think of audience types in their evaluations and decisions to reject movies from the state. Rather, by reviewing films for all audiences at once instead of parceling them into separate categories, there is an attendant shift in the responsibility of viewers and an activation of the viewer as an audience type as well. In other words, I will argue that when censors reviewed a film for all audiences at once, they expected less discipline among audiences, and assigned more responsibility to their own evaluations and decisions. This will be discussed in detail below.

From their projection room in lower Manhattan, MPD reviewers screened, discussed, and evaluated their impressions and interpretations of the moral fitness of the motion pictures slated for exhibition in the state of New York. A rejection from the MPD meant an applicant, i.e. a film distribution company or film studio's distributive arm, would not be granted the obligatory license for public exhibition of their film due to its moral shortcomings, rendering it illegal to screen the film in the state. Thus while their evaluation of a film took place after it had been bought by a distributor with the intention of screening it at commercial venues, this was no guarantee that the MPD would approve of the film in its current state. In this way, the determinations and moral evaluations of the MPD created a sense of what was appropriate for public viewing. The MPD's decisions were also potentially extremely problematic for a Hollywood studio, as they withheld or granted the key to the prestigious and lucrative New York City market,

generating publicity for a motion picture to ride on in other, subsequent-run towns and theaters. Furthermore, their impressions were influential beyond the borders of New York State. Other censorship boards from across the country wrote the MPD, seeking their opinion on certain titles. States such as Florida often adopted their decisions wholesale, effectively contracting out the job of movie censorship in Florida to the state of New York, the archives strewn with telegraphs from Florida's censorship board requesting decisions on specific titles reached by the MPD.[94] Thus the reach of the MPD's decisions extended beyond the confines of the state of New York.

The fee for acquiring an exhibition license from the MPD brought in enough revenue for the office that it was able to cover its own overhead and raise additional resources for the state. This was one reason why state censorship boards remained in existence into the 1960s, though the legal perspective on motion pictures had shifted from that of a cold-hearted business to a First Amendment-protected form of speech in the 1950s (see Wittern-Keller, 2008 for a detailed account of these legal developments). The MPD reviewed both American and foreign film, as the main qualification requiring motion pictures to be reviewed was the venue of projection. If a title was being shown in any commercial venue, i.e. if a ticket price was being asked, it had to have a license from the MPD (though they did *not* review current events films or newsreels).[95]

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[94] Because of the physically limited number of copies of motion pictures, other censor boards around the country may have been reviewing movies already altered by the MPD. Censors from Maryland once wrote to their MPD counterparts in an attempt to figure out which print of a picture they had received, confused about whether their print had already been censored by the MPD or not.

[95] There were a few borderline cases involving current events films which some the reviewers found problematic. There are also cases of documentaries being banned, and instances where other states did

The Motion Picture Division (MPD) employed a little over a dozen individuals at its office

on 80 Centre Street in New York City. According to their salaries, the organizational

hierarchy placed the MPD chairman at the top, followed by his assistant (throughout the

years of the organization this position was always occupied by a man), a chief reviewer,

three other reviewers, a financial clerk, a secretary and office manager combined, a

confidential stenographer (assigned to the MPD chairman), three other stenographers, four

field inspectors, and a projectionist.[96] In 1927 the MPD's director earned between $7,000

and $9,000 a year, roughly $98,750-$118,500 in 2014 USD. Chief reviewer Sallie

Minsterer earned roughly half that, with a reported salary of $4,000 a year, around $52,600

in 2014 USD. The reviewers earned between $39,500 and $46,000 in 2014 USD.[97] The

staff worked humane weeks, averaging around thirty-six hours, with sixty minutes given for

lunch. Work in those days ended promptly at 4:45PM every day, with Saturdays

constituting a half-day. Reviewers were also granted twenty-four paid working days off for

twelve months' service, and 16.5 days with pay for sick leave.

 A succession of Motion Picture Division chairmen waged small battles with the over-

arching Education Department, continually demanding the salary of MPD reviewers be

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overreach their statutory limits and censor newsreels. See Butters (2007) for more on this, especially chapter nine.

[96] Undated document, "Series C – Classifications and Compensation of Positions." MPD A1429, box 20, folder 31. In the 1930s, these reviewers were Sallie McRee Minsterer, Mary D. Farrell, Helen H. Kellogg, and Evelyn Burt. The two field inspectors, Mr. Donnelly and Mr. Dermody, occasionally stepped in to review a picture (their first names were not noted in the archival materials consulted).

[97] Ibid.

increased. "It is an injustice to ask these three reviewers, who represent the very kernel of our work and are persons of broad education and experience, to work for their present salaries," wrote one MPD director.[98] Elsewhere he noted there was, "a great responsibility to the public in the position of reviewer and reviewer in charge. This statute was enacted to protect the public and if we desire to efficiently do this work we must assign a salary which would guarantee a very high type of personnel for each position."[99] Over a dozen years later, the conversation had not changed much. "It is strongly affirmed that the salary grade of the Board of Review should be raised to conform to the increased difficulty and the level of judgment required to satisfactorily perform the duties of the position," wrote then-director Hugh Flick.[100] This continual emphasis on the importance of the work of MPD reviewers, as reflected in their salaries, is a clue in to the weight of the responsibilities MPD reviewers were taking on. The reviewer was obliged to take on a certain sense of moral responsibility to the public, and the weight of this commitment ought to be reflected in the wages associated with their work.

The official job description for motion picture reviewers at the MPD read as follows:

> "REVIEWER, Motion Picture Division, Department of Education. Salary $2000 to $2250. One immediate appointment expected. Minimum age 25 years. The duties of the position include reviewing pictures in projection rooms used by the Motion Picture Division to determine what action should be taken relative to deletions in the film, or whether or not the film should be licensed for exhibition; inspecting films in exchanges and theatres to determine whether or not films

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[98] Ibid; the thickness of the paper and typeface seemed to match other documents in this folder, which date between 1926-1929. It's likely this was written by Dr. James Wingate, director of the MPD from 1927-1932, before heading West to head the Studio Relations Council of the MPPDA.

[99] Wingate to Lloyd L. Cheney, "Memorandum: tentative class lists - Motion Picture Division," Oct 6, 1931, p2. MPD A1429, box 20, folder 31.

[100] 1949 Summary Report for Consideration of the Board of Regents, p13. MPD A1429, box 4, folder "Society to Maintain Public Decency (civic groups)."

are properly licensed and equipped and whether eliminations have been made and the orders of the Division complied with; aiding in prosecutions by acting as witness and otherwise. The work may necessitate some climbing of ladders to inspect films in operators' booths and will necessitate eight hours work per day, principally when theatres are open in the afternoon, evening and Sunday with occasional work at the main office. Candidates must have had not less than two years of work in recognized colleges of universities. They must possess good eyesight, hearing and general health without physical deformities. They must have a general knowledge of motion picture and of the motion picture statute and regulations of the Board of Regents relating thereto; must possess tact and good judgment in dealing with the public. Additional credit will be given for training in dramatics and dramatic expression, teaching and coaching dramatics. Subjects of examination: Written examination or practical test in viewing and analyzing selected films and written report thereon, relative weight 4; training, experience and general qualifications, relative weight 6."[101]

In the words of one reviewer, the job was, to "review all pictures to be exhibited in the State of New York, except current events and newsreels to determine whether they are in accordance with the New York State statute; and to make necessary deletions in case of violations."[102] In other job descriptions the reviewers describe their position as one of movie reviewing, requiring familiarity with motion pictures and writing skills. Two MPD reviewers noted one ought to read the short stories and novels that films were based on, much like a film critic or reviewer in a popular press would.[103] Such thoughts support the notion that censors preferred to be called reviewers, even officially as such. This discourse also created a responsibility of the reviewer to New York State legal codes, and less responsibility for proper cinema consumption habits on cinemagoers.

Another reviewer's self-description of her position noted its minutiae in regards to demanding deletions or declaring rejections. "When deletions are made they are written in concise form on the review slip. The report denoting which statute they violate. When

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[101] June 21, 1933, Esmond to Presstman. MPD, A1429, b21, f7.

[102] Handwritten untitled undated document, "Reviewing, Mrs. Burt." MPD A1429 b20, f31 "personnel."

[103] Ibid; "Answer to Question 10, Mary Farrell." MPD, A1429 b20, f31.

pictures are rejected the story depicted on the films is written in detailed form - which statue or statutes it violates and *whether subject matter, action or both, are responsible for its rejection*" (emphasis added). This same reviewer was also weary of foreign titles, pointing out that "at present many of these films are in reality propaganda which require most careful viewing."[104] Chief reviewer Minsterer wrote, "If the theme of a picture is such that the regulations cannot be met with, a complete synopsis of the picture is submitted by Reviewers (sic), with reason for rejection, and filed with report ... Problem pictures are reviewed by entire staff and thoroughly discussed before decision is made" (what a problem picture looked like will be discussed in section 2.5).[105] And in the words of another reviewer, after reaching the conclusion a film ought to be rejected, one would, "[c]onfer with other Reviewers (sic) and Director of Division."[106]

These comments highlight the social and deliberative processes through which censors interpreted movies and arrived at conclusions about their moral value and appropriateness for public exhibition. Such comments are also windows into the sense of responsibility associated with their work, wherein the censors themselves were responsible for upholding public morality through cinema, with practically no responsibility placed on viewers themselves. This point and positioning will offer a sharp contrast with the empirical sites presented in the following chapters, wherein parents and audiences are responsibilized directly. These practitioners' perspectives of their work also emphasize the approach, or

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[104] Kellogg, Undated memo. MPD A1429, box 20, folder 31.

[105] "Answer to Question 10, Sallie McRee Minsterer," undated typewritten memo. MPD A1429 b20, f31.

[106] "Answer to Question 10, Mary Farrell." MPD, A1429 b20, f31.

telos, to motion pictures and morality as practiced at the MPD in general. Pictures ranged from morally appropriate to morally corrigible to completely incorrigible. Though the reviewers felt they ought to note whether the subject matter or the action was to be held accountable for the rejection, in practice they did not make strict note of this, as my discussion on their rejection sheets below will evidence.

Furthermore, in specifying when a theme was incapable of meeting regulations, there was no standard guideline or process for arriving at such conclusions. In other words, the evaluative process was both social and deliberative, sometimes involving a back and forth between the studio and the censorship office over specific scenes or words in a film which censors deemed problematic, and always involving conversation and discussion among MPD employees over the meanings and morality encoded in a film. Because cinema could potentially harm, offend, or insult a viewer, there needed to be an active monitoring of the narratives being consumed by the public.

These perceptions of the reviewer yield an image of the censor as one who aspired toward purely legal evaluations for motion picture and morality, who was also obliged to negotiate and discuss their evaluations with colleagues, superiors, and studio personnel. Yet this does not necessarily translate into a flat, one-dimensional method of employing the mechanisms and tools utilized by the censors, as I will discuss below. Their written evaluations leave hints and traces of the multiple, as opposed to singular, audiences for whom a specific title was being rejected. This responsibilized the reviewer in a way that

emphasized their moral authority over the moral authority of viewers, and tied moral ambiguity to danger rather than enabling it as a resource for moral self-knowledge. This particular self-responsibilization was also enabled by the insularity of the office, a phenomenon that afforded censors the perception of objective evaluation in motion picture legal-morality.

3.3) The closed space of the Motion Picture Division

The MPD created an amount of protective secrecy around the work of its employees and their evaluative methods, while maintaining strategic relations with other censorship, civic, and religious organizations whose goals resonated with their own. Before discussing their relationships with other organizations, I will first focus on the insularity of the Motion Picture Division, tying it to the responsibilization of MPD reviewers, a type of responsibilization that placed their perceptions over the opinions and interpretations of others. The Motion Picture Division reviewers were primarily concerned for the health of the entire social body of the state of New York, but they did not freely share or circulate their evaluative schemas, processes, or internal thoughts. Reviewers positioned their decisions in a manner that associated cinema with the sculpting of a better citizenry, a lofty telos for the enterprise.

While outsiders frequently requested their rejection slips and eliminations bulletins, the MPD only shared this material with other censorship or review boards (this archival material has, to the best of my knowledge, been completely overlooked, though it offers

rich insight into the perceptions and interpretations of this specific group of cinema viewers). Many raised questions, criticism, and arguments challenging the MPD's refusal to share its eliminations bulletins with anyone other than other state or industry censors, but reviewers at the MPD often rationalized that if such eliminations bulletins were made public, the very point of eliminating such scenes or story lines would be defeated. This specific type of insularity, wherein the MPD only fully communicated with other like-minded organizations, further underscores their commitment to fostering a cinema of a particular type of moral worth for public consumption, responsibilizing reviewers over all over viewers and critics.[107] Another reason for not making the eliminations bulletins public had to do with industry studios demanding privacy and protection of their narrative material.

As early as 1923, MPD director George Cobb replied to a request from the Author's League of America, explaining, "We have adopted the policy of other Boards of not distributing generally the eliminations which we make, for the reason that it would have a tendency to reflect upon the producers whose pictures are presented for review."[108] (Industry censors at the Production Code Authority were similarly unable to share their

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[107] This secrecy resonates with the culture of secrecy surrounding the contemporary Hollywood ratings administration, the Motion Picture Association of America's Classification and Ratings Administration (CARA). As there is very little that is publicly accessible about this organization, there was not enough material to make it a site of exploration in this dissertation. Yet it is worth pointing out that the act of controlling the circulation of a film has long been associated with a certain lack of transparency. The major difference between these organizations is that CARA explicitly organizes movies into several age-based audience categories, while the MPD had no age-based categories at its disposal. Both organizations occupy different positions in the space between production and consumption, CARA being closely associated with the industry, the MPD operating quite outside of it.

[108] Cobb to Schuler, March 31, 1923. MPD A1429 b16, f16.

logic and materials with the press because of pressure from Hollywood counsels to keep

such material secret, as producers and member studios were fearful other studios would

nab their ideas should they be discussed publicly.) In a moment of exception, the New

York Public Library wrote to the MPD in 1937, requesting dialogue sheets of French films

for their theatre collection. In response, then-MPD director Irwin Esmond noted that

while they normally did not give information out to anyone besides the license applicant,

he would bend the rules given the public character of the library's work. This small

moment evidences one public institution's trust in the work of another.   Beyond this small

coterie of organizations however, the MPD was reticent to distribute information on the

calls they made.

It is important to note this organizational fraternalism was not always granted. Other state

agencies and departments had to formally ask to screen materials in the MPD's projection

space, their requests littering certain folders of the MPD's archival holdings. Local

exhibitors who wished to screen a picture in advance were routinely turned down, though

women's film clubs however had an easier time accessing MPD facilities and were often

received in the office on 80 Centre Street.[109] Generally however, the MPD was unwilling

to share the dialogue of movies they reviewed, as well as the eliminations they ordered,

with any party not affiliated with the producing studio. But the question of what

constituted a public record, and whether the work of this office was thus public record, was

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[109] This may be because, as the office was mostly filled with women reviewers, there was more of a sense of access among women's clubs to the MPD. This may also be because some members of the MPD may have come to film censorship by way of club membership. Both of these thoughts are speculative however, as nothing in the archival material supports any one possibility over another.

raised by some of the MPD's detractors. Others, like the publisher Pete Harrison, made

requests for eliminations bulletins and were met with rebuffs by the MPD, leading

Harrison to start his own age classification system in his publication, *Harrison's Reviews*, at

times antagonizing the MPD by claiming films they had approved were in fact unfit for

screening. In a moment of annoyance, one MPD director, Irwin Esmond, wrote to

reviewers soliciting their opinions on all recently banned films in the Albany diocese,

warning them not to quote *Harrison's Reviews*, but rather to report on what they thought of

the picture themselves.[110]

The isolated nature of the opinions and evaluations of Motion Picture Division reviewers

was related to a more authoritative sense of responsibility embedded in the reviewers'

decisions. MPD reviewers were not to rely on other critics or reviewers of the movies, but

to rely on *their own* perceptions and thoughts. This both legitimated the perspectives of

MPD reviewers over other reviewers, but also over other audiences in general. Such

legitimacy was critical to responsibilizing reviewers to make decisions on behalf of all

citizens, and placed their interpretations in an authoritative position, while protecting their

opinions from the scrutiny and criticism of other prying eyes.

There was also a self-preserving aspect to the insularity constructed around the MPD. The

closed nature of the MPD was one way the identity of its reviewers remained protected.

Throughout the inter-war years it was the organization's policy to deny interviews to the

press unless cleared by the Department of Education's Publications Bureau first, under

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[110] Esmond to Reviewers, September 11, 1934. MPD A1420, b16, f20.

whose purview the MPD was situated.[111] Some interviews of course *were* granted, but they

tended to be innocuous or light-hearted. "Any time my husband suggests we retire, I'm

ready at the drop of a hat. I'd like to go to Florida and never, never see another movie as

long as I live," one reviewer, Katherine Siegrist, said. "We can't exercise personal opinion,"

she continued. "We don't object to anything personally. In looking at a picture, we

merely ask ourselves, 'Does the law apply to this?'"[112] The reporter included another tidbit

about the office culture that speaks to how the reviewers understood their own work,

noting, "Mrs. Siegrist would bristle at the suggestion that she is a movie censor. The word

censor and censorship is avoided like the plague by all the reviewers."[113] (Other censorship

offices felt a similar revulsion to the word censor, obvious instances including the still

extant National Board of Review's name change from the National Board of Censorship,

and the similar rejection of the word "censor" by employees at Hollywood's Production

Code Authority.)

Aside from the tight-lip policy around reporters or the press, MPD reviewers were also not

to make requests as employees of the MPD to theater managements or amusement

companies for tickets.[114] And as mentioned above, their viewings and projection rooms

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[111] Graves to Deputy Commissioner, Assistant Commissioners, Directors and Chiefs, June 8, 1931. MPD A1429, Box 16, Folder 18.

[112] "Fun to You, Work to Her," ~ *Service*, March 21, 1949. MPD A1429, Box 16, Folder 18. Siegrist joined the MPD in the 1920s as a field inspector in Buffalo, New York, before moving to New York City and joining the reviewers at the office in lower Manhattan.

[113] Ibid.

[114] The same memo had been circulated the previous year, suggesting some reviewers may not have adhered to the request. Wingate to members of MPD, April 27, 1928. MPD A1429, Box 20, Folder 5.

were tightly controlled, both in terms of access as well as scheduling. For example, films scheduled for viewing the next day that were already in the office could not be reviewed ahead of schedule. The review screenings were strictly limited to authorized personnel, the projectionist being charged with, "[s]eeing that no unauthorized person is permitted to review any subjects in the review rooms."[115]

Procedural elements also safeguarded the dominance of MPD opinion on decisions. For example, one reviewer rarely rejected a film on his or her own. The rejection slips list the names of the reviewers that were present for the screening. Nearly always, a pair of reviewers was involved in a film's rejection. Yet though reviewers held that personal opinion never entered into their rulings, a closer examination of their review slips reveals a fusion of personal opinion with their evaluations of a film's compliance with the law (discussed in section 2.5). The secrecy surrounding the work of the reviewers combined with the closed circuit circulation of their written opinions thus created a distance between the reviewers and their critics as well as audiences in general, a distance which may have enabled reviewers to maintain the position that personal opinion in no way entered into the evaluation of a picture with the law of the state of New York.

Yet I do not wish to give the impression MPD employees maintained delusions of grandeur of the eminence of their decisions. MPD director Irwin Esmond insisted to a detractor of one of their decisions, "It may be that our reviewers erred in judgment in passing this picture even with eliminations. We do not claim to be infallible. We do, however, make

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[115] The Duties of Mr. Jacobson, the projectionist, undated document. MPD A1429, Box 20, Folder 31.

an earnest effort to administer a difficult statute."[116] Esmond also felt that reviewers ought

to note changes in public sentiment, and as far as possible reflect this in their professional

evaluations.[117] So while on the one hand the MPD was quite insular and secretive about its

work, it did maintain official relations with other organizations, such as other censorship

boards, as well as the internal Hollywood censorship board.[118] State censor boards read

one another's eliminations bulletins regularly, another MPD reviewer noting, "We also

keep ourselves informed as to the deletions made by other states or their boards ... This

necessitates the reading of their bulletins."[119] While the Motion Picture Division was very

insular in some regards, it also communicated and strategized with other like-minded

organizations. Having discussed the more secretive aspects of the MPD and the type of

responsibility with which it coded their work, I will now shift the discussion to the

connections they maintained with other organizations, and the moral repercussions they

associated with the cinema through interpretations of it.

3.4) The Motion Picture Division and its relations with other civic organizations

As censors deliberated on the meanings and messages of a film, so too were the moral

repercussions of a film discussed and debated, ultimately being established through a set of

social interactions. Moral repercussion was dependent in some ways on the position an

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[116] Esmond to Sumner, July 17, 1931. MPD A1429, b4, folder "Society to Maintain Public Decency (civic groups)."

[117] Esmond to Reviewers, August 15, 1934. MPD A1429 b20, f31.

[118] In the late 1920s and early 1930s a few MPD employees had even been recruited by the Production Code Authority to take up positions as industry censors, or self-regulators as they referred to themselves.

[119] Undated typewritten document, "Reviewing motion picture films," Helen Kellogg's self-description of work. MPD A1429 b20, f31.

organization had in relation to cinema, highlighting the flexibility of the analytical category of moral repercussion. In other words, here I will demonstrate that the moral repercussions associated with cinema-going and the narratives one may find in the movies is not a stable or a given, but a construct that was debated and created among and between intermediary organizations engaged in the controlling of media flows. Moral repercussion had a dualistic nature in its construction and deployment by the MPD, expected both of a film as well as its viewers. Through this discussion of moral repercussion in the work of the MPD, I will pinpoint the didactic nature of cinema for which MPD reviewers expected it to be used. These points will be advanced by focusing on the MPD reviewers attention to other censorship and review organizations, their dialogue with other social hygiene oriented organizations, and its political strategizing with other organizations in order to defend and maintain the legal grounds for their own operations. I will discuss each of these areas in turn.

The Motion Picture Division regularly received and filed other censor board's decisions, its records showing particular attention paid to the Australia Commonwealth Film Censorship, the British Board of Film Censorship, the Kansas State Board of Censorship, the Virginia State Board of Censors, the Division of Film Censorship in Ohio, the Ontario Board of Censors of Motion Pictures, and the Pennsylvania State Board of Censors. These bulletins also have the initials of the reviewers on them, suggesting that in the least, they were passed around and signed.

The MPD also paid attention to the degree of opacity other censor boards constructed around their work. The office solicited other censorship and review boards on whether, and if so how, they handled the dissemination of their own eliminations bulletins. Blank question sheets were sent to various state boards; one response from the Maryland State Board made its way back to the MPD and into its archives. They inquired as to whom a review board's eliminations bulletins were distributed aside from other review boards, if they distributed these materials to news and trade papers, whether news and trade papers had ever made demands upon them for such information, and if they refused these requests how did they go about justifying it. This suggests that other censorship boards also received the criticism that they ought release their eliminations bulletins as a matter of public record. The curiosity about the way in which other organizations positioned themselves to audiences, as well as the actual decisions and moral boundaries established by these organizations points to the ways in which MPD reviewers were engaged in reflexivity as well as fine-tuned adjustments of their own cinematic moral boundaries. Knowing where other like-minded organizations were drawing the boundaries exposed MPD reviewers to the opinions of their colleagues, underscoring the social aspects of interpretation and meaning making in cultural and moralistic evaluation practices.

Many organizations had long-running correspondences with the Motion Picture Division. Pressure groups like the Catholic Legion of Decency periodically wrote to the MPD, asking for automatic barring of certain types of movies, such as productions from specific studios or dealing with specific topics. One of the more interesting and long-standing

conversations was between the MPD and a man named Charles Sumner, chairman of the Society for the Suppression of Vice (NYSSV), later the Society To Maintain Public Decency. Sumner would often write long reviews of movies he had seen, or heard of, to the MPD, advocating for them to reverse their admittance of a particular title and ban it instead. The exchanges below lends credence to the MPD's claim that they did not outright ban types of movies, rather they attempted to judge each film on its own merits. It also evidences something about the way their decisions were made, the types of moral repercussions they located in cinema, and the role of moral repercussion in their evaluation decisions. This illuminates the dual nature of moral repercussion in acts of censorship and content control: it is both read into the object, and expected of it.

As early as 1927 Sumner was corresponding with MPD-head Wingate over a film titled *The Night of Love*, which dealt with *le droit du seigneur* (the alleged historic rights of feudal lords to take the virginity of young women living on their estates). Wingate responds to Sumner's complaints by noting, "Your criticism of the picture seems to be principally one of theme. I am not sure that this Division under the Statute has authority to reject a picture that is thematically improper. Such action might come dangerously near encroaching upon the field of 'free press.'"[120] Wingate rebuffed Sumner by pointing out that his criticism was inappropriate, i.e. too vague and broad an action for the MPD to take seriously, especially if it is to not fall prey to being criticized by free press advocates.

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[120] Wingate to Sumner, June 1, 1927. MPD A1429, b4, folder "Society to Maintain Public Decency (civic groups)."

Wingate rebuffed Sumner again when he wrote suggesting all crime and gangster films be denied a license on principle, stating:

> "In my opinion, we cannot entertain the general condemnation of all crime pictures. I think you will agree with me that much depends upon the treatment of the subject, and, therefore, each picture must stand upon its own merits or demerits; for instance, if a picture vividly portrays racketeering being practiced upon many legitimate industries in large centers of populations in such a way as to vividly bring this nefarious practice to public attention, and at the same time shows that in the end racketeering does not pay the racketeer, then it seems to be quite possible that such a picture would be a deterrent of crime."[121]

Here Wingate both defended the notion that a film ought to be evaluated on its own merits, and employed moral repercussion as a way to justify the MPD's decision not to ban the film. Moral repercussion was activated as a lesson the public could learn from viewing the film, a desirable or beneficial repercussion for achieving social hygiene through cinema. This rebuff exposes the use of moral repercussion as valuable, as well as an underlying telos of cinema supporting the work of the MPD. They wished to achieve a better society through educating citizens, both about what to do as well as what not to do, through their control of cinematic texts.

The relationship between the MPD and the NYSSV continued throughout the 1930s. In attempting to sway the MPD's opinions, Sumner often reviewed movies himself. He wrote to the MPD with his personal impression of a film, with the express hope the MPD would reverse its decision on a picture and revoke its exhibition license. One such case involved the now-classic gangster film, *Scarface*. Wingate responded to Sumner's pleas to automatically bar all gangster pictures by informing him that the MPD had in fact initially denied the film, but when it was resubmitted with considerable changes the MPD was

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[121] Ibid.

persuaded to approve the film. Wingate added that he had seen the movie and felt it did not incite to crime at all, rather it suggested a large problem in cities that needed to be dealt with. (These issues were often referred to as sociological, with some referring to such pictures as sociological problem pictures - invoking a different notion of sociology than the sociology of contemporary practice.) Furthermore, Wingate felt the film wasn't likely to be a financial success anyway, as "present reports indicate that ... it will be followed by other 'another epidemic of gangster pictures.'"[122] Again, cinema as an instructional or didactic device is evidenced in Wingate's response to Sumner.

Sumner also often complained about the advertising accompanying a picture, especially in the "short talkie" descriptions of films before others are shown – or trailers in contemporary parlance. Wingate expressed some hesitation at the request, pointing out that the MPD's authority did not extend that far. Sumner pressed the matter, offering his organization's aid if the MPD should decide to pursue legislation to the affect of authority over advertisements. But Wingate replied by playing it safe, noting that the Democratic Party had been opposed to the Motion Picture Statue since its enactment in 1921, and that every year someone introduced a bill to repeal the act. As such Wingate did not feel there was much likelihood of extending any real legislation on the issue of picture advertising.[123]

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[122] Wingate to Sumner, May 3, 1932. MPD A1429, b4, folder "Society to Maintain Public Decency (civic groups)." It is interesting to note the Sumner was something of a self-appointed censor, perhaps in some ways an even more aggressive censor than the employees of the MPD. A clipping about Sumner reports that in 1937 he personally lead the seizure of four hundred copies of the highly acclaimed novel, *A World I Never Made*, written by James T. Farrell. The clipping is from January 20, 1937, unknown newspaper. MPD A1429, b4, folder "Society to Maintain Public Decency (civic groups)."

[123] Wingate to Sumner, Sumner to Wingate, November 7 and 12, 1930. MPD A1429, b4, folder "Society to Maintain Public Decency (civic groups)."

Aware of the fickle nature of politics and the MPD's precarious position, another MPD

chairman, Irwin Esmond, wrote:

> "The Division has found itself, from practical experience, to be always on the firing line … If, for example, certain border line portions of any particular film are allowed to remain which appear to the *critics* to be obscene, immoral or indecent, the Division will be strongly criticized for not performing its statutory duty. If, on the other hand, these same scenes are ordered to be eliminated, the same *critics and columnists* will just as strongly condemn the action of the Division as interfering with the right of freedom of expression and limiting artists development" (emphasis added).[124]

These exchanges and memos give a sense of the demands placed upon the MPD by other

organizations that concerned themselves with the aim of achieving social hygiene, as well as

a sense of political self-awareness harbored by the chairmen, and likely shared by the

reviewers, of the MPD. Wingate's responses to Sumner illuminate the moral repercussions

cinema was thought to have on viewers by the Motion Picture Division, justifying the

depiction of problematic or undesirable actions on the silver screen should such actions be

convincingly and thoroughly punished by the end of the film.

The MPD's belief in "moral compensating values," the notion that as long as justice was

meted out by the end of a film no audience member would walk away with the wrong idea,

indicated the educational ends for which cinema was to be employed. Moral repercussions

that were acted out on the screen would then translate into desirable moral repercussions

among viewers, rendering a film valuable in a specific manner. Such logic was also used to

justify the decisions of the MPD when the organization was criticized by other

organizations, organizations that could be important political allies in other situations.

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[124] Internal memorandum, March 17, 1933. MPD A1429, b15, f1.

Moral repercussions were thus both extracted from the actions and narratives depicted in a film, and projected as effects on a film's audience. Moral ambiguity, or filth, remained for the censors as a looming and harmful consequence of movie-going. Both usages of moral repercussion are utilized in the MPD's decisions to curtail or enable the circulation of a film in the state of New York.

3.5) Rejection slips, citizens, and cinema

Whenever a New York State censor found a film to be inadequate, they were obliged to note on the rejection sheet not only the legal reasons for which a film was not proper for exhibition in the state, but also to note how and why the subject matter of the film was morally unfit for the fine citizens of New York. Between 1929 and 1963, the Motion Picture Division filled out 117 different rejection slips. The rejection sheets often made the point that a specific film was far from compliant with the law, that merely excising scenes would not help it pass muster, and that if shown horrible effects on its audience were likely to ensue. Through a close examination of the reviewers' written rejection sheets, or evaluations, of a film I will demonstrate that there were two audience types censors routinely rejected films for, the virtuous and the susceptible. At times, these two audience types are invoked individually, but in other moments they are invoked in tandem, linked through different perceived problems with a plot or narrative.

The virtuous citizen was the viewer who took offense to various kinds of immoral acts. The susceptible viewer was the child or immigrant who was extremely susceptible to the wrong

ideas being presented on the screen, at risk of tipping over the edge and committing a

crime because of it. I will go over both of these audience members in turn while detailing

rejection slips of titles from the MPD's archives. Ultimately film reviewers sought to use

film as a tool for shaping the civic sphere. There is a subtle but important point to draw

out here: though the censor's work was seemingly restrictive, they were also focused

on "positive" cultural engagements, aiming to generate a good sort of citizen. I will go over

both of these audience members in turn while detailing rejection slips of titles from the

MPD's archives. This examination will also elucidate the connection between the

analytical category of filth, and appropriateness, as understood against a universal moral

backdrop, wherein the public faith in various institutions and the notions of law and order

were to be respected and maintained rather than questioned, or transgressed.

Figure 2) New York State rejection sheet, MPD A1422, f1929.

The susceptible viewer can be identified in the censor's decision of the film, *American*

Gang Busters (1939). Summing up his opinions, MPD director Irwin Esmond concluded,

> "It is claimed that the narration which accompanies the film points to the lesson that crime does
> not pay. At the same time it is shown that these criminals achieved national notoriety, led daring
> and adventurous lives, and that many were successful in eluding the law for long periods while they

continued their trail of robberies and murders ... [e]ven in death these bandits appear to have been accorded funerals, attended by hundreds of persons, as if they had died as heroes instead of the murderers that they were. I cannot think that such a picture will act as an effective deterrent to crime. On the other hand it is my opinion that such a picture is calculated to stir the imagination of those whose minds are open to criminal suggestion, to emulate these notorious criminals who achieved a national reputation within a comparatively short time, who flouted the law on many occasions."[125]

The reviewers were thinking of particular real-life copycat incidents. The susceptible viewer was imagined as young, impressionable, or perhaps in some position of financial insecurity. Sometimes they would be swayed toward criminal acts, be it smoking marijuana or committing adultery, or murder.   In this example, there is a dangerous conflation of the hero with the murderer, and the censor is concerned some viewers would be unable to distinguish the one from the other. The reasons for rejecting a film, delineated by New York State law, were never clearly defined, and were quite vague. These reasons included a film being labeled inhuman, indecent, sacrilegious, obscene, immoral, tending to corrupt morals, or tending to incite to crime (often more than one reason is given for a film's inadequacy, labeled at the bottom of the reviewer's written opinions of the film).

Scarface was a gangster film that was deemed to incite to crime in its entirety. The first sentence of the film's evaluation stated, "This picture teaches the technique of crime," again revealing how MPD reviewers understood the susceptible viewer. The first and foremost threat such a picture posed was one of teaching audiences how to commit crimes and become a gangster. Did it follow that the exposed audience would all become

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[125] MPD A1422, f1939. The reviews of the MPD are all housed under the series number A1422. All titles screened by the MPD were evaluated on an evaluation sheet. These sheets are organized by the year of a title's application for a license, and further organized by whether or not the title was rejected. In citing this material I will provide the series number and the year when the title was rejected. The year in this way serves as the box number.

criminals? "The entire picture, both by action and dialogue, shows in detail how to become a gangster – how to hold up a man, subdue him and take away his money. While it is portrayed in a comic manner, the theme and its meaning are of serious import and the entire picture tends to incite to crime," the reviewers concluded.[126] One last evaluation centered on the susceptible viewer will summarize the vulnerabilities of this audience type. Reviewing a film titled *Marihuana (The Green Monster)* (1936), MPD Chairman Irwin Esmond offered:

> "In my opinion, such a picture does nothing to aid in the apprehension of persons guilty of peddling such drugs, but on the contrary, tends to arouse curiosity *in the minds of young people and others* as to the nature of the cigarettes that contain the drug. It also encourages *those who may be criminally inclined* to believe that there is a great deal of money and power to be gained in handling this and other narcotic drugs as a business" (emphases added).[127]

In order to protect such susceptible viewers from teetering over the edge, censors argued for a complete ban on the types of narratives presented here. This notion of filth and appropriateness relied on a static respect for the extant social order, and a calculation over the persuasiveness, believability, or level of detail through which "lessons" on crime and evil were depicted on the screen. This reinforced the connection between the work of the censors and a didactic telos of cinema, wherein the screen wielded an important and always potentially dangerous power over the viewer. Such understandings of filth and appropriateness rely on the prerogatives of the censors as the worldview to be reproduced on the screen, with all titles falling short of such realizations being trimmed, censored, or

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[126] All quotes from MPD A1422, f1931.

[127] MPD A1422, f1936. Esmond also offered his "opinion" in rejecting *Ecstasy* (1936), a title that has been the object of much scholarship in film history (see Wittern-Keller 2008 for an engaging discussion). It is interesting to note that only MPD chairmen used the expression, "In my opinion," in their reviews, the other reviewers always writing from the third person point of view.

banned. And, as the sensibilities of the censors figured into their moral evaluations of cinema, the virtuous audience archetype was invoked in their decisions. I will now turn the discussion to the gender and sexuality-based texture of moral danger in cinematic content.

Associated with access to motion picture theaters were underlying concerns over sexuality and gender. This is evidenced by the numerous rejections slips for films dealing with nudity, sexual hygiene, prostitution, rape, illegitimate children, abortions, or extra-marital/pre-marital affairs, and their portrayal as films that were unsuitable for public or commercial purposes. By presenting a few examples of such films here, I wish to draw the reader's attention to the connections MPD censors made between sexuality and gender on the one hand and societal threat or moral danger on the other. Regarding the 1934 film *Comets of 1930*, MPD chairman Esmond wrote:

> "In my opinion, the picture here presented is corrupting and degrading both in theme and portrayal. The story of a young man who apparently lives on his girl's money and then spends her money on the 'parlor house' girls is neither decent nor moral. The story of the shooting of her lover by the jealous girl is immoral and tends to corrupt morals. While this picture is obviously a satire or travesty, I cannot overlook the purport of the story and its essential immorality. The last verse of the song reads: 'This story has no moral.' That is very true. It would also be true to add that the purport of the story is decidedly immoral."[128]

It is important to note the connection between a film that has no morals, or a lack of morality, and its *im*morality as perceived by the MPD chairman. By directly linking a lack of morals with immorality, Esmond offered a moment of key insight into the telos of film as conceptualized by the MPD. Motion pictures could not be neutral, or lacking, in their

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[128] MPD 14322, f1934.

morality – this was an immoral move on the part of the film, and warranted a film's

rejection from the New York market. Films could not be amoral, but had to be morally

appropriate in order to be fit for public screening in the MPD's eyes. This instance of

immorality also points to difficulties with the portrayal of both men and women.

Amorality was akin to immorality, especially when it concerned sexuality and gender, as in

the contemptible case here wherein a young man "lives on his girl's money" and spends it

at a brothel.

Other instances of sensitivity around gender, especially men, was impotency. About the

1934 film *Madame du Berry* (1934), one MPD reviewer wrote, "Impotency is a revolting

subject for screen entertainment in any form," though they later approved the film on its

third submission round.[129] On the flip side of impotency, *Tomorrow's Children* (1934) was

condemned because it dealt with another taboo topic, namely sterilization:

> "This film, in theme and portrayal, is not decent for screen presentation to general audiences. [...] It
> presents to the audience definite information of methods that may be employed to permanently
> prevent conception and reproduction ... [I]t teaches the audiences that might view the picture if it
> were licensed, how conception and reproduction may be prevented through sterilization, which, in
> itself, is 'Immoral,' 'will tend to corrupt morals,' and 'will tend to incite to crime' within the meaning
> of Section 1083 of the Education Law."[130]

It is important to include mention of the fact that the film was a criticism of sterilization

practices supported by early 20th century eugenics thought, as the film detailed the plight of

a young woman born into a family of alcoholics, criminals, and physically deformed

individuals. When the state threatens to stop the family's welfare checks should they not

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[129] MPD A1422, f1934.

[130] MPD A1422, f1934.

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sterilize all of their children, and thus discontinue the spread of their impure genes, the only "normal" child, Alice, protests and attempts to run away. In the end she is only saved by the revelation that the matriarch of the family is not her biological mother, and thus her genes are pure. Another aspect of the way in which sexuality perturbed the proper telos of cinema for the MPD reviewers is thus revealed here. The presentation, or rather discussion, of sterilization practices, regardless of whether a film was critical of them or not (as was the case in this film), was inappropriate for screen presentation. This implies that the space of cinema was not the appropriate realm for discussion, criticism, or instruction on sexuality and sexual hygiene.

Other instances of the moral dangers presented by gender and sexuality on the screen abound. Implications of lesbian or intimate relations among women were condemned. For example, the cult classic 1931 German film *Mädchen in Uniform* was described as, "totally unsuitable for public showing in any audience."[131] Prostitution was another common issue, as the discussion of the 1933 Barbara Stanwyck film *Baby Face* evidences: "The scenes are revolting and the method by which she [Baby Face] obtains her men is unmistakable in its meaning," by which the censors implied prostitution.[132] Although the film was eventually released, with its implications of prostitution in tact, it is credited as one of the major reasons for the re-organizing and strengthening of the Production Code Authority in Hollywood (Vieira 1999). Nudism was never approved of, no matter what the

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[131] MPD A1422, f1932.

[132] MPD A1422, f1933.

context or angle of a film, and was always spoken of as indecent. Illegitimate children were also always a problem in a film's plot, regardless of how well-intentioned the children or the parents of such children might be.

These instances of moral danger as presented by gender and sexuality highlight a critical difference in the way the MPD and the PCA evaluated a film's overall morality. Many films rejected by the MPD involved plot resolutions such as the deviant woman's ultimate demise, a change of heart for the better in a wayward woman's ways, intentions to marry in instances of pre-marital relations, or attempts at abortion or giving children up for adoption in instances of illegitimate pregnancy. Such plot resolutions were often lauded by the PCA as morally compensating values, and were routinely insisted on in their negotiations with studios about a script's moral decency. The fact that such films were still found to be unfit for public screening by the MPD further underlines the strict morality and telos which motion pictures were associated with in the perspective of New York State censors.

The virtuous citizen's pressure points can also be detected in the evaluation of the film *Fixed* (1931), which told the story of a lawyer who bribed a juror to convince his fellow jurors the accused was guilty only of manslaughter, as opposed to a conviction of first-degree murder. The MPD reviewers reasoned that:

> "Many of the scenes portraying this trial are a mockery; the Judge is shown, acting in a bored manner, drawing pictures on paper, and the District Attorney is shown filing his nails, while the life of the defendant is at stake. Actual scenes of bribing the juror are shown on the screen. These scenes, and the power of the one man who has been 'fixed' to dominate the eleven others, *is a serious indictment of our system of trial by jury. The entire picture is a reflection and a travesty on justice.* It is

therefore denied a license on the grounds that it tends to incite to crime and tends to corrupt morals" (emphasis added).[133]

Here the virtuous citizen was offended by such criticism, their faith in the system tarnished, or worse, their faith in fellow humankind. In rejecting this picture, the MPD protected these virtuous New York state citizens from a moment of potential mental, intellectual, and moral anguish. To elaborate on the didactic telos of film for MPD reviewers, there was a specific desire to use cinema as a tool for shaping the civil sphere. Portraying institutions in certain ways through the silver screen was taken seriously as a shaper of civic identity and perception, and extended the sensibility of the virtuous citizen to a societal level, basing notions of social hygiene around such perspectives and logics. Though the corruption of morals was often tied to criminal activity, it could also be the result of a critique of existing and established institutions in American life that was too explicit.

Yet these two citizens were not always implicated in such discrete terms. The rejection slip for the film *Shame of a Nation* (later re-edited and released as the American classic *Scarface*) evidences this point, arguing:

> "[The film] portrays the life story of a notorious gangster character, designated in the picture as Antonio Camonte. It is the story of a man who, in order to satisfy his personal greed for power and money commercialized murder. It portrays wholesale murder, more than twenty murders being portrayed in the film. He, Antonio Camonte, kills not only racketeers and officers of the law, but innocent women and children with brutal indifference. *He escapes punishment by perjury, vicious coercion of witnesses and corrupted use of the laws of the community.* He is ruthless, immoral and vicious. He kills and orders flowers sent to the funeral of his victim. He forces his way into a hospital carrying flowers to conceal his deadly weapons, and kills a man on his deathbed, whom he had previously mortally wounded. *The portrayal glorifies the criminal in his ruthless viciousness and immorality and makes his bravery attractive.* In luxury, he romps through his criminal life. The committal of many crimes and brutal murders are portrayed, *but only one life is taken by the law. The authority of law and government, if at all, is only weakly portrayed until the very end of the picture when*

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[133] MPD A1422, f1931.

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Camonte is taken into custody, tried and executed" (emphases added).[134]

There are two registers of rejection at play simultaneously in this construction of filth. On the one hand there were the techniques Camonte employed in going about his murderous ways. The escapement of punishment, the flowers used to hide his weapons, the coercion of witnesses, and the glorification of his criminal life. These concerns articulated the susceptible citizen who was vulnerable to falling into such habits and practices themselves. At the same time, the reviewers stressed the depictions of a weak law and government, one that only manage to take one life compared to Camonte's twenty plus murders. The government only prevailed when it finally brought Camonte into custody, not before. The censors found that the film was indecent, inhuman, and immoral. I add here a semi-colon perhaps, as they also included that the film would tend to incite to crime, and corrupt morals. The first group of reasons, indecency, inhumanity, immorality, points to the virtuous citizen who was concerned with the depiction of the state as effete and ineffectual. The second group of reasons, inciting to crime and corrupting morals, points to the second viewer, the susceptible citizen, for whom the glamorous depictions of crime and its attendant lifestyle posed a threat - specifically of inciting to crime, or corrupting one's morals.

While the reviewers worried about cultural stereotypes (here the Italian gangster was modeled off of the infamous Al Capone), they also employed morality as a universal, abstract framework for guiding citizenship. Characters and plots themselves could be read as being dangerous in two ways at the same time, connecting these two imagined

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[134] MPD A1422, f1932.

citizen archetypes. The susceptible viewer was thus a potential virtuous citizen, returning the characterization of the MPD's work as also being focused on positive cultural engagements, generating a good sort of citizen through a repressive set of actions. How one evaluated a motion picture depended both on whom one imagined as the audience member, and the kinds of effects one anticipated a picture as having on that audience.

New York State Motion Picture Division reviewers thus evaluated film along strict lines of right and wrong, creating an unchanging sense of cinematic filth and appropriateness. By responsibilizing themselves as the gatekeepers to the New York State market, MPD reviewers placed their opinions and interpretations above those of any other viewer, save perhaps the current MPD chairman. Moral repercussions were read into the actions of the characters on the screen, but were also tied to potential actions or grievances on the part of the viewer. Moral repercussions were also reflected in the registers of rejecting a film for exhibition, wherein susceptible viewer were possible law-breakers and virtuous citizens required a constant fostering or preservation of their faith in the social order of the day. Should either group be exposed to the wrong kind of cinema, or cinematic filth, they would either be motivated to transgress such an order, or risked having their belief in the system undermined.

I will give another example of the simultaneous invocation of both citizen types. *Strong Arm* was found to tend to incite to crime, being a picture that, "glorifies a desperate criminal, showing him creating fear in the minds of the prison guards, and officers, and

being able, even under stringent supervision, to commit murder in the prison."[135] The reviewers interpreted this picture as showing one man's ability to strike fear in the hearts of prison guards. While he is shown committing further crimes in prison, he is shown *on the eve of his death* for a first crime of which he has already been convicted. In a way his fate was already decided and inevitable. Moral compensating values were already in place from the beginning of the story; despite this, the MPD rejected the film. In the picture's rejection sheet, one reviewer particularly lamented the fact the protagonist was shown gaining notoriety in his last hours, "even under stringent supervision, [committing] murder in the prison."[136] Even though the film did not end well for the protagonist, the reviewer felt he was glorified in the process.

Reviewers at the MPD were concerned then not only with the lessons potentially being offered on the screen, but also with the way certain institutions and situations were depicted on those screens. Reacting as virtuous citizens, they were incensed to the point of denying an applicant an exhibition license. Among the possible messages of the film, *Strong Arm's* rejection sheet reveals the reviewer was upset over the story of a prisoner committing a crime such as murder in prison, giving problematic message such as prisons are lax institutions, people are not capable of actual reform, prisons are not helping criminals reform enough, and that even under the "stringent supervision" of officers, murder was still committed, depicting law enforcement officials and prison guards as weak and ineffective. These were the weaknesses of the virtuous, as well as the susceptible,

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[135] MPD A1422, f1930.

[136] MPD A1422, f1930.

viewer, emphasizing the point that these are not necessarily disjointed types. The virtuous citizen's moral outrage reveals pressure points, or entry points, into a life of crime or deviance by the susceptible citizen elsewhere.

It is important to point out that the virtuous and the susceptible viewer were both a part of the extended hetero-sexual family, or the social body, for whom screen fare needed to be controlled. The message being sent to parents watching films were as much of a concern as the messages being sent to the nation's youth. Mr. Esmond decided of the film *Pitfalls of Youth* that:

> "The picture is *supposed to point a moral to parents* – not to show favoritism towards one child to the detriment of another, and to lay the degradation of this child at the mother's door. The picture is in no sense effective as a moral lesson and is filled with immoralities and crimes. Among the crimes are: seduction, nudity in the presence of a mixed group, smoking of narcotic cigarettes, smuggling of what is apparently narcotics, kidnapping, and suicide. There are many *disgusting* scenes, including the young man and girl mauling each other in the automobile; the night club scenes, the cabin scene and nude bathing, and, generally, the views of this drunken, drug-ridden woman and her companions" (emphasis added).[137]

While all art can be understood by those intermediary actors shaping the flow of cultural objects between production and consumption as a tool of moral education, motion pictures were – and continue to be – conceptualized as having direct influence over the subsequent behavior of audience members. The emphasis here on the parent as the appropriate audience for the moral lesson presented in the film will contrast sharply with the focus of chapter 5, which offers a close look at the work of the contemporary media rating non-profit organization Common Sense Media. Here, parents were positioned as lacking in responsibility, invoked as the students of morality put forth by the film and thus

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[137] MPD A1422,f1936.

subject to the interpretations of such lessons by the MPD censors. Parents in the work of

Common Sense Media however are responsibilized as unique meaning-making individuals,

whose opinions and interpretations are precariously positioned as the final authority in

defining media filth and appropriateness for their children. They are also expected to pay

heed to the work of other experts, such as media scholars and developmental psychologists.

Where the two types of responsibilization differ most sharply is in the way MPD censors

delegated no responsibility to viewers, while Common Sense Media reviewers delegate

some responsibility to psychological experts and researchers, but even more so to the

parents of young viewers, and even to young viewers themselves.

Lessons on immoral behavior, breaking the law, murdering people, stealing various items

of possession, and sometimes even getting away with such transgressions were at first glance

banned from the screen. But so too were plotlines which depicted such stories that were

then brought to justice. Whether it was the susceptible viewer, the virtuous viewer, or

both, MPD reviewers watched carefully and in making their decisions blended opinion

with their interpretation of the law. The examples above highlight the articulation of the

MPD's archetypal audiences while describing problematic plotlines in an attempt to

uncover the kinds of audiences being forged in their interpretations motion pictures. A

plot could pose problems for both the susceptible as well as the virtuous, simultaneously.

The legal grounds on which motion pictures were rejected suggest MPD reviewers figured

audiences as viewers who only saw in black or white. But the MPD's rejection slips reveal a

serious concern with establishing the moral fitness of a film, or the lack thereof, by assigning aspects of its narrative arc to a legal problem, be it immorality, indecency, or any of the other vague, yet powerful, terms the reviewers felt adequately described what they were seeing. Thus in evaluating motion pictures, reviewers had to provide a reason, or reasons, for why they were altering a film.

Some pictures were re-edited and re-submitted to the MPD, passing upon a second or third attempt; thus not every title issued a rejection sheet was condemned forever. Yet, embedded in these rejection sheets were judgments made on the part of the reviewer that were *not* expressed in legal terms. The MPD was authorized to evaluate a motion picture's compliance with the laws of the state of New York, but this platform bolstered a reviewer's argument to reject a picture overall according to their own interpretations of the vague notions of obscenity, immorality, indecency, etc. These evaluations provided evidence for why a picture was unfit to be viewed in New York state. In making these arguments, the censors' words reveal a universal morality and authoritative responsibility employed in interpreting movies. Universal morality and authoritative responsibility were also employed in locating and classifying narrative morality in the name of the virtuous and their weaker counterpart, the susceptible. Taking seriously the portrayal of institutions and actions on the silver screen, the censors' work also reveals a logic of censorship which articulated cinema as a shaper of civic identity and moral-legal perception – one which it was hoped all citizens could be instructed in and shaped by.

3.6) Motion Picture Division reviewers as fixed moral interpreters

The conviction that the screen can teach the wrong kinds of things, and that some members of society are more susceptible to fall sway to thwarted logics than others, has a long tradition in the regulation of cinematic content. Here I have traced two audience images, the virtuous and the susceptible, in the work of New York State censors, in order to exemplify the fixed and invariable moral interpretive framework with which the censors distinguished cinematic filth from purity. The particular context in which the MPD reviewers operated was one of isolation around their work and identity, mixed with careful and cautious allegiances with external organizations. This created a distance between the reviewer and the publics in whose various names they were censoring films. Reviewers were thus enabled to see themselves not as censors but as reviewers who evaluated films not according to their own tastes but according to standards of screen morality set down by the law of the state of New York.

MPD censors responsibilized themselves in a definitive manner, wherein their interpretations were defensible, even if they were later overturned. But not all content control intermediaries operationalize their decision making abilities the same, nor do other content control intermediaries maintain such a concentrated share of the responsibility of morally appropriate viewership practices. As the next chapter will evidence, educators who advanced the film appreciation tradition, such as Edgar Dale, were adamant about responsibilizing viewers themselves, leaving little decision making ability to the educators' interpretations of a film's moral message and value. Film appreciation positioned audiences as requiring instruction on the practice of deciphering a film's morality, and tips

for reflecting on their own personal sense of morality. By comparing a film with their moral boundaries, audiences decided for themselves how much value they wished to place on a particular movie. This is a large point of comparison with the work of MPD censors, although it would be inaccurate to suggest the two were completely dissimilar. Both censors and film appreciation educators shared a sense of a universal moral foundation on which one could build their interpretations of a film. The former responsibilized themselves to be aware of this foundation and uncover it in a film, while the latter expected audiences could do this work themselves if given the proper tools and techniques.

The dual nature through which moral repercussion is reflected and refracted in and off the screen also forms a point of comparison between the work of the MPD and reviewers discussed in chapter 5, at the Film Estimate Board of National Organizations (FEBNO). FEBNO reviewers began with an acceptance of the premise that film and moral messages in a film were malleable, susceptible to the interpretations and specific sensitivities of a given organization or set of viewers. When conflicts in their interpretations occurred, the reviewers noted all of the audience ratings assigned to a film instead of forcing themselves to come to an agreement on one audience rating. This presented the readers of their ratings bulletins with an opportunity to follow the organization associated with FEBNO of their choice, and decide on their moral boundaries themselves (albeit within the guided framework of FEBNO's ratings and short reviews of a film's plot and morality). This sense of moral repercussion stands in stark contrast to the understanding harbored among employees of the MPD, for whom cinema could have one meaning and at most two

effects on an audience: those who "get it," and those who don't, both of whom ran risks in viewing the wrong sorts of materials. Moral repercussion is dualistic for the MPD, and more "customizable" in the case of FEBNO.

The reviewers at the Motion Picture Division officially reviewed motion pictures for legality, yet their judgments reveal the construction of and justification for their anticipations of audience reactions. There were two different registers in which motion pictures were conceptualized and censored. One feared film for being possibly understood as real, with possible harmful educational side effects; a film could also be censored for not being close enough to reality, for not accurately representing the legal reality censors were in place to protect. Here the virtuous and susceptible audience emerges as two, often times linked, citizen archetypes through which the MPD censors framed their decisions. Harmful effects of cinema were most likely to emerge from exposure to films dealing with crime and general law-breaking activity, sexuality and gender, and criticism aimed at the state. These expectations reveal not only the two audience types discussed above, but also the lack of room for individual perceptions to operate morally appropriate decision-making. Through their work, the MPD censors created specific sensibilities and logics around the analytical categories of filth and moral ambiguity, moral repercussion, responsibility, and the ultimate telos for cinema, which concentrated the moral authority to police cinema in the hands' of state censors.

Though the censors also believed cinema was a very potent didactic tool, which if harnessed and tamed, could shape a better citizenry for tomorrow, like all censors they lacked the means to totally harness cinema themselves. Yet as approaches to screen cleaning transitioned from censorship to ratings, the censors would find themselves on the outs of societal trends. In the meanwhile, the work of their contemporary scholars in communications research, education, and sociology would form the foundation for today's media ratings regime, as will be highlighted in the following chapter.

Chapter 4
Good Pictures and the Scholarly Construction of Cinematic Consumption

4.1) Scholarship on cinema

In the first half of the 20th century, censoring cinema was a question many different groups

and organizations had a stake in. This chapter examines early scholarly manners of

identifying moral ambiguity in cinema, and the ways in which either viewers or the

industry were activated with the responsibility of reducing such ambiguity. What does the

construction of the viewer in relation to cinema reveal about the telos of cinema? Some

scholars invoked the viewer as being vulnerable and in need of protection, similar to the

censors discussed in the preceding chapters; others invoked viewers as being in need of

instruction on how to be a good viewer and a better citizen. Despite these differences,

both those who argued for cinema censorship on the grounds that ambiguous narratives

harmed citizens and those who advocated for instructional methods to teach viewers how

to be good citizens through careful cinema viewership shared the belief that a mimesis of

cinema was occurring. Where they differed was in their understanding of whether

spectatorship was always a form of dangerous learning, or whether it could also be a

productive way to learn. It is critical to note this distinction between potential benefits and

constant threats, as the work of the former form the foundation upon which contemporary

media raters base their presentation of textual moral ambiguity as a resource for the viewer,

and not a threat, and plays a central role in the transition from censorship to ratings in

practices of media morality.

In addressing these issues, this chapter examines the work of early social scientific and mass communications research, focusing on the work of the salient Payne Fund Studies and the sociologists and educators associated with it. I will begin with a discussion of the work of the Motion Picture Research Council (MPRC), and continue with an examination of the Payne Fund Studies they commissioned, a pioneering collection of early communications media research which has become the kind of classic many pay lip service to but few engage with. I will present a close examination of the work of Edgar Dale, Herbert Blumer, and Frederic Thrasher, and provide a discussion of the organizations and schools of thought associated with the research of these individuals. While all were concerned with the dissonance between on and off-screen lives, some progressive educators, such as Dale, found beneficial messages possible in the cinematic medium, activating the viewer to become morally responsible movie shoppers. Other researchers such as Herbert Blumer stressed the dissonance between societal context and distance from social institutions as a core factor in the less desirable behavioral effects of cinema viewership. Lastly, Frederic Thrasher activated and responsibilized those leaders and community workers who were somewhere in between the university world and the layman's, steering the film appreciation work of Edgar Dale in a different direction.

If one did not support official forms of censorship, yet agreed that cinema had corrosive effects on viewers, the question became how could one obtain good pictures if not by censoring the bad ones? While New York State reviewers censored cinema in order to protect the minds of citizens (see chapter 3), communications researchers and sociologists

argued self-censorship was the best approach to keeping the screen clean. They argued that

teaching individuals how to be thoughtful viewers by emphasizing the beneficial lessons

found in cinema was the most effective way to limit the deleterious outcomes of the

movies. In highlighting how fears are constructed and held to be valid by researchers

studying the effects of cinema, I will draw attention to the ways in which certain roles were

responsibilized. Here, the analytical category of moral repercussion becomes key. I will

argue that organizations such as the Motion Picture Research Council hoped to legitimize

their claim that exposure to cinema had specific influences on viewers, by fostering the

articulation of cinematic moral repercussions in scientific terms. This set an early

precedent, as will be discussed in chapter 6, where I will discuss how the contemporary

media ratings organization Common Sense Media connects its guidance on media morality

to contemporary media scholarship.

4.2) The Motion Picture Research Council's movement toward a clean screen

The Motion Picture Research Council (MPRC) was an organization of scholars, educators,

and civic and religious group organizations that supported the notion of cleaner pictures,

and research for it. In her inaugural address for the MPRC, then-president Eleanor

Robson Belmont invoked the image of the citizen, beginning with the thought that, "All

students of the subject [the motion picture] accept the fact that it is one of the strongest

forces for education in the world. What it teaches our children today will determine, in

some measure, the quality of our citizenship of tomorrow."[138] In noting the immense

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[138] Undated address, "Mrs. Belmont's talk at the luncheon at the Hotel Roosevelt, p1. Eleanor Robson Belmont papers, Columbia University Rare Book and Manuscript Library, box 29, folder 29-2 (ERB from

popularity of the growing medium and the large sums spent on its production, advertising, and distribution, Belmont introduced the MPRC as a membership organization whose members were, "interested in studying the problem presented by the motion pictures." Staunchly opposed to censorship, the MPRC arguing instead for a sort of cooperation with the industry, and restraint among viewers. "We believe that the most definite progress made by the human race comes through self-control and not by prohibition," Belmont stated, summarizing one aspect of the organization's approach to questions of content control.[139] She noted the support of social scientists as well as "character-building agencies," a term that linked the didacticism located in cinema to larger notions of morality and the building up and construction of good morality and movie-going practices. This set the tone of self-control or self-restraint, as opposed to censorship, and linked it to progress, to better humanity, and to ideals of a democratic society.

The MPRC responsibilized actors and positions along the production/reception spectrum, but focused their efforts on citizens and audience decisions. They presented a broad argument that responsibilized producers, exhibitors, and viewers, and did so in a language that connected proper cinematic consumption to a Christian ethos. Attempting to distinguish their claims from other concerned organizations, they enlisted social scientists to bolster their advocacy positions. In order to clean the screen, the MPRC remained

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hereon).

[139] Undated address, "Mrs. Belmont's talk at the luncheon at the Hotel Roosevelt, p1-2. ERB box 29, folder 29-2. Despite this stance, Hollywood would come to refer to the popular MPRC's commissioned research, the Payne Fund Studies, as harmless, as the "Payneful Studies." See Leff and Simmons (2001) and Balio (1993) for more on the industry's reaction to the studies.

resolutely opposed to any sort of federal censorship, insisting instead on self-restraint and

the abolishing of certain industry distribution practices (while lobbing anti-Semitic

condemnations at Hollywood producers). I will present each of these elements below,

before discussing in more detail the research of the social scientists associated with the

MPRC and the Payne Fund Studies they commissioned.

For MPRC members, the main problem challenging a clean screen was the commonly

practiced phenomenon of block booking and blind selling. Some scholars associated with

the Payne Fund Studies agreed with the MPRC's emphasis on abolishing these practices,

and understood such an abolishment to function as a mechanism of screen cleaning. Both

Chicago sociologist Herbert Blumer and sociologist and education scholar Edward Dale

shared this opinion. "We should lose national leadership in the educational field if we did

not make a quick 'try' for the elimination of block booking and blind selling as the first

step toward a free film theatre," wrote a fellow MPRC member to Belmont, noting that

Blumer, Dale and others agreed with this position.[140] The opinions of these social science

researchers were used in discussion between MPRC members as a way to bolster their own

perceptions of the industry, its functioning, and how to improve it. (Though it is

important to note that researchers affiliated with the Payne Fund Studies were also worried

about associating an overtly political stance with their research, about which more will be

said below.) One MPRC member also noted that the organization would benefit from

having a figure like Dr. Dale lead its cause, helping it maintain influence and status among

other organizations such as the Catholic Legion of Decency and the National Education

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[140] Miller to Belmont July 1, 1934. ERB, box 25, folder "Motion Picture Research Council."

Association. Such scholars correctly recognized the problem, and helped define the extent

of it. "It is our understanding," Belmont noted in a public address, "based on studies

made by social scientists and independent groups in welfare agencies, character-building

agencies, and individual experiences that approximately twenty to twenty-five per cent of

the pictures shown at the present time are of a low character and absolutely unworthy of

presentation from any point of view."[141]

To be a good citizen consumer of cinema was linked in several ways with a Christian-

American ethos. Abolishing the industry practices of block booking and blind selling was

touted as the American way of dealing with cinematic dirt, one hint at the proper

relationship between consumer and producer, between citizen and cinema, and between an

industry and a community. Before I discuss this further, I will say a word on what block

booking and blind selling were. Motion pictures of the past were a physical commodity.

Prints of pictures were cumbersome, involving multiple reels and were expensive to print,

as well as difficult to maintain (many movies from the era were lost to fires, sparked by the

flammable nature of the chemical composition of the filmstrip). Block booking offered a

way for distributors to lease a selection of pictures, often a dozen or so at a time, to an

exhibitor, or a movie theatre owner. The "trick" was that a block often included a couple

of pictures with the most popular stars of the moment, and a handful of others that were

not projected to generate much box office, known as B-list movies. Thinking that

exhibitors would only lease pictures with bigger names and leave the B-list movies behind,

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[141] Undated address, "Mrs. Belmont's talk at the luncheon at the Hotel Roosevelt, p2. ERB, box 29, folder 29-2.

block booking gave distributors a way to ensure that all the movies a studio produced were exhibited.

At the end of summer, exhibitors would travel to regional distribution centers where the new wares of the Hollywood studios were being hawked. In the case of blind selling, the catch was that pictures were often being advertised to exhibitors for lease before having actually been shot. Exhibitors would sign on for a package of movies without having actually seen each picture, making it impossible for them to decide before signing any contrast what they wanted to show and what wanted to pass on. "Perhaps I am all wrong about everything and some sort of federal censorship, and licensing is inevitable. But it will be more American to do away first with the block-booking and see if results, better than anything possible under censorship, are not soon achieved," wrote an anonymous author to a member of the Motion Picture Research Council. "If you can persuade Congress to do away with block-booking or any cheating substitute, the industry will automatically clean itself," the same author hypothesized. [142]

This link between self-restraint and consumer-driven change, denoted as an American way, responsibilized the consumer – and the exhibitor – in a distinct way from arguments for censorship. The responsibilities of the industry are also positioned differently, being muted rather than emphasized. "We do not seek censorship. We believe in liberty, but we also believe there must be some way found to restrain those who abuse liberty. A man is

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[142] Both quotes unsigned letter, "Dear Henry," March 23, 1934. ERB, box 25, folder "Motion Picture Research Council," p5 and p2 respectively.

free to drink today, but if he drinks to excess we lock him up for disorderly conduct,"

Belmont stated. In another moment of analogy, Belmont said:

> "We permit and encourage the sale of medicine. Among these medicines there are poisons which are habit-producing and if indulged in to excess bring about degeneracy of the individual. A man who sells those poisons may say – 'my business is a commercial enterprise. There is a public demand for heroin. It pays well to sell heroin,' – but the need to protect humanity led to a law prohibiting the sale of this drug and we jail the man who is caught distributing it to the public."[143]

Here Belmont established an analogy between cinema and drugs, in which Hollywood was

characterized as drug-dealer who defended the sales of their products based on demand, or

box office. Because the industry was not a philanthropic or educational organization, why

hold them to such standards? In this stance both the producer and the consumer are

responsibilized: stop making bad movies, and stop letting your children see bad movies.

"All we are asking of the motion picture industry is that when we go to a theatre with

children, or with adults, we shall not be shocked and horrified because we are having

presented to us a most despicable side of life in unusual proportions, and getting it week in

and week out in an absolutely unbalanced diet and in the name of recreation," Belmont

noted at an MPRC luncheon.[144] It was problematic that the images depicted, "despicable

sides of life," but equally problematic that exposure to such images were not balanced with

other, admirable, images – and that all of this was presented to audiences as recreation. In

this iteration of the problem, the moral repercussions of cinema consumption and the

responsibilities for a clean screen were not in the hands of consumers alone.

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[143] Undated address, "Mrs. Belmont's talk at the luncheon at the Hotel Roosevelt. Both quotes ERB, box 29, folder 29-2, p3.

[144] "Address of Mrs. August Belmont, Luncheon Motion Picture Research Council," Hotel Bellevue Stratford Philadelphia, Friday, May 11, 1934, p3. ERB, box 29, folder 29-2.

Citizens and viewers were thus responsibilized, but not for things beyond their means, such as a certain type of knowledge about a movie that has been inaccurately advertised. The MPRC wished to rally folks around the notion that they could, "say to the motion picture industry, 'You have a right to conduct business; you have a right to conduct it at profit, but when you injure the moral fiber of this nation then you are going beyond the point which any business has any right to go.'"[145] By blending the responsibilities of individuals and businesses, the MPRC advanced a multi-faceted argument for the protection of the social body and articulated citizens that could and should demand better products. This sort of broad argument was an ideal foundation for the later work of the Payne Fund Studies researchers, who probed the question of cinema and its interaction with audiences from a variety of angles.

Arguing against the notion that the MPRC was a bunch of cranks and teachers who felt the cinema should be run like a classroom, Belmont pointed out the distinguished names on the board, such as the commissioner of education for the federal government, scientists, and educators, but Belmont quickly added, "what we really represent is just the average citizen – people really like myself are the ones who make up the large body of public opinion that is coming in behind this movement."[146] Yet as this discussion has evidenced, more than one party was responsibilized in the MPRC's problematizing of cinematic

[145] Ibid., p5.

[146] Ibid, p6.

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morality, including not just the consumer and average citizen but also the producer to whom some sort of limit was to be communicated, a limit beyond which they risked injuring the nation's morality. In this way, the MPRC also drew one-to-one connections between the lives of those on and off screen. In an unsigned letter addressed to someone serving on Mrs. Belmont's committee, the author notes:

> "The faults of pictures are not the faults of the writers, directors, actors and technicians who actually make them, but of those so-called higher-ups who have a strangle hold upon the industry and with whom, beyond any argument, rests the decision as to what story shall be made into a picture and what story shall not. For the most part these higher-ups are men without culture, background or honor. And most naturally these qualities are reflected in the production for which they are responsible."[147]

This is an example of an explicit coding of guilty parties as uncultured and unsophisticated, implying their lack of Christian discipline and morality and forming a thin cloak over the anti-Semitism rampant in criticisms of the industry. The thought that it was a lack of decent people at the upper echelons of the decision-making positions in Hollywood was a key part the configuration of the problem of cinematic filth. In another anonymous letter commenting on Belmont's, and the MPRC's, various positions, the writer points out that, "unclean minds willing to prostitute the youth of America for profit and personal gain can not be expected to contribute toward any movement for a clean screen. Only the lewd and lascivious story appeals to their senses and they can not be expected to react otherwise."[148] This component of the MPRC's argument was that responsibility for the morality of cinema resided with the characteristics or social and cultural capital of those selecting

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[147] Unsigned letter, "Dear Henry," March 23, 1934. ERB, box 25, folder "Motion Picture Research Council," p1.

[148] Unsigned and undated letter, "Your air mail letter of the 28th." ERB, box 25, folder "Motion Picture Research Council," p3.

stories and pictures, not with the entire organization of the production of movies per se.

Referring with even more open contempt for Hollywood executives, the unnamed author

wrote, "They make vulgar pictures because they are vulgar persons," continuing on to

compare Hollywood executives with editors of the *Saturday Evening Post.*[149] The morality of

the content creator was tied directly to the moral value of the content in their products.

The anonymous authors also responsibilized consumers, distinguishing between those who

chose to consume cinematic filth, and those who refused to consume such material. This

introduced a class element in the way proper and improper cinematic consumption was

practiced. Speaking of the former, one of the MPRC's interlocutors noted two types of

viewers:

> "...the lowest dregs of society demanding more and more, and more and more, of the same kind of
> material, and so perhaps to some extent it does pay. On the other hand, we have a feeling that the
> other parties, citizens of this country, have the same sort of feeling that we have, and that is that a
> great body of people in this country are decent people and they want decent things."[150]

To be the good American citizen was to avoid risky films, understood as anything

unsettling or questionable in character, and to strive for a cinema that was uplifting. But

what was cinematic dirt, more specifically? How could it be detected, and thus avoided?

And what were the actual consequences of viewing cinematic filth? In order to address

these issues, and buoy their cause, the MPRC commissioned the Payne Fund Studies.

"Obviously," they wrote, "the moving pictures are doing things to our thoughts and

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[149] Ibid. *The Post* was a publication that tied its origins to Benjamin Franklin and remains well known for its
celebrated Norman Rockwell covers, perhaps the pictorial epitome of the Christian middle-American ethos.
This is yet another instance where the good, cinema-consuming citizen is depicted as distinctly Christian.

[150] Ibid., p7.

feelings. It is high time that we discovered what these things really are. There is no problem that could be of greater concern to those who are interested in the quality of our future citizens."[151]

4.3) Commissioning the Payne Fund Studies

The Payne Fund Studies is a series of studies commissioned by the Motion Picture Research Council in the late 1920s and early 1930s, published between 1933 and 1935. These studies are considered to be the first examination of cinema and its influence on viewers, as well as one of the most comprehensive studies on the matter.[152] The unifying research problem for the studies was to better understand how motion pictures were influencing American youth. This question was addressed from a range of empirical and methodological perspectives, including the scrutinizing of children's sleeping patterns, attempts to quantify the content of motion pictures, and the collection of movie autobiographies written by American youth themselves. Behind the scenes, those commissioning the research hoped the scholars' arguments might be combined to support the demand that block booking be stopped so communities could better select what was appropriate for them. It was thought that there must be some restraint other than censorship, such as successfully channeling public opinion, to sway Hollywood production patterns.

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[151] May 15, 1930, summary of Payne Fund studies addressed to various members of advisory board.

[152] See Jowett et al. (1996) for an in depth examination of these studies, their reception, and their legacy in communications research.

While the scholars associated with the Payne Fund Studies were spread across institutions like Yale, New York University, Penn State, and Ohio State, most authors can be connected back to the early "Chicago School" of sociology.[153] The research director, W. W. Charters, first taught education at the University of Chicago, then moved on to Ohio State. Herbert Blumer, whose contributions to the study will be discussed below, and L. L. Thurstone were both younger faculty in the Sociology Department at the time, and students in the department such as Philip Hauser and Paul G. Cressey also wrote reports for the Payne Fund Studies. These commonalities held aside, there was also much internal debate about whether these pioneering methods were sophisticated enough or still too naïve in their research problematization of the motion picture and their relation to adolescents and society. There were also discussions about how social science research should be positioned in relation to public policy and ameliorative approaches, which involved a normative orientation to the relations between cinema and society.

Internal documents evidence these social scientists did not wish for their findings to be associated with any polemical or partisan stance on the motion picture policy. Yet the implicit assumptions of the Payne Fund Studies were certainly value-based, placed in a moral context by the next head of the MPRC, William Short. While researchers did not share these value assumptions, other contemporary sociologists and social scientists easily criticized them. Mortimer J. Adler's 1937 critique of the studies, *Art and Prudence,* dealt a solid blow to the project (Jowett et al., 1996). Elsewhere, the cornerstones of Chicago

[153] I use the term "school," though Howard Becker (1999) urges us to question the kind of uniformity and coherence one imposes by using the term "school" in relation to the diverse thinkers and researchers affiliated with the Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago between the world wars.

Sociology Albion Small and Robert Park argued for a knowledge-based, as opposed to feeling-based, approach to examinations of social action and civic improvement.[154] The lack of unity among the scholars affiliated with the Payne Fund Studies and their colleagues led to many different models, findings and conceptions of the movies and their harmful or beneficial effects on viewers. The next section will focus on two of the studies in the series, specifically the work of Edgar Dale and Herbert Blumer, comparing their arguments for audience responsibilization as well as the ways in which moral repercussions were constructed out of the dissonance between on and off screen lives, narratives, and experiences.

Part of the problem of movie going was the discrepancy between the scenarios and situations depicted on the screen and the lives of those viewing such images. This dissonance was pointed out as problematic some twenty years prior to these studies, in Jane Addams's publication *The Spirit of Youth and City Streets* (1909). "The House of Dreams," her chapter on movie theaters, highlighted the problems wrought by such discord between the "romantic conceptions" of the city's youth and their cruel and trivial lives, though she laid most of the blame on the lack of municipal governance over both viewers and the industry. "Is it not astounding that a city allows thousands of its youth to fill their impressionable minds with these absurdities which certainly will become the foundation

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[154] Park (1938) claimed in an *American Journal of Sociology* article, titled "Reflections on Communication and Culture," that the movies have devastating and subversive effects on local culture, though he did not substantiate this claim. Positioning the function of cinema as "definitely symbolic," despite attempts to employ it for educational purposes, Park concluded, "as such it profoundly influences sentiment and attitudes even when it does not make any real contribution to knowledge" (1938: 205). Over time, mass communications research became more closely linked to public opinion and public agendas as opposed to general social science research.

for their working moral codes and the data from which they will judge the proprieties of life?" she asked.[155] This concern between narrative and behavior continued to color the work of scholars in the 1930s whose work is discussed below, but the location of responsibility was shifted from the motion pictures to the viewer themselves.

4.4) Cinema as a social value

The education scholar Edgar Dale contributed two bodies of writing to the Payne Fund Studies, *The Content of Motion Pictures* (1935), and *How To Appreciate Motion Pictures* (1933). The latter of these studies went on to become a best seller during its initial publication in the mid-1930s, and continues to influence film appreciation scholarship (Jowett et al., 1996). Rather than articulate the viewer as vulnerable and passive, Dale rested his work on the premise of the viewer as reformer (Nichols 2006). In comparison, Herbert Blumer activated the context surrounding the viewer as the main contributor to cinematic morality and its effectiveness. Frederic Thrasher situated his contributions in between these two scholars, targeting community leaders through film appreciation methods as the ones who could most efficiently convince viewers of proper viewing practices, rather than leaving viewers to their own devices. The output of these scholars will be compared along the lines of moral repercussion and the amount of active responsibility a viewer was assumed to exercise in analyzing the distance between their station in life and the narratives flashing before them on the screen.

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[155] http://www.d.umn.edu/cla/faculty/jhamlin/4111/JaneAddams/Adammsyouth4.html (accessed March 9, 2015). Civic righteousness for Addams and others rested with a close scrutiny of the moral themes the theaters and pictures were discussing, as this undoubtedly influenced the position of audiences, or citizens.

Dale presented a definition of moral repercussion that was somewhere in between the viewer and a universal, macro sense of moral right and wrong. The primacy of personal opinion was essential in establishing filth from purity, but there remained an ultimately right and wrong opinion. This middle stance is also evident in Dale's attempt to position cinema as a social value, not an entertainment value, implying the viewer was both an individual with their own agency to interpret meaning in a film, yet in need of specific instruction on how to identify the social value of a film over any other. I will spend the bulk of this section discussing the work of Edgar Dale and the early film appreciation movement (this will form an important point of comparison for the work of the contemporary ratings organization Common Sense Media, presented in chapter 5). Dale's work activated movies as a potential vehicle for beneficial messages, whose rewards could be unleashed by way of careful content analysis by scholars. Viewers could then discern, with the proper instruction, how to maintain if not improve and contribute to the social order through better cinematic consumption. After discussing film appreciation, I will shift the focus to the work of Herbert Blumer and Frederic Thrasher, two other scholars associated with the studies who brought different approaches to the study of the motion picture and its place in society.

Many scholars associated with the Payne Fund Studies argued, and in some sense worried, that the content of motion pictures was often remote from the lives of those who consume them. Dale was also concerned the depiction of romantic love in motion pictures created too much dissonance with the lived experiences of those watching such courtships.

"Emphasis on wealth and luxury, which serves neither to point a desirable ideal nor to offer methods by means of which the mass of the people can attain that ideal," was also harmful for viewers (1935: 224-225).[156] Along with other contemporary researchers and critics of the movies, Dale supported the notion that those who attended motion pictures were looking for escape, writing, "Many people obtain indirectly at the movies what others in the more economically favored groups obtain directly" (1935: 225). Yet Dale also argued motion pictures contained social values as well, and that there was a need, as a result, for more *sense* in art. "The motion picture, however, has a very definite and serious role to play in the political, economic, and artistic education of the people," he wrote, highlighting the problem as one that ultimately affected children (ibid.: 226).

Dale's content analysis of the motion pictures also offered advice on how to evaluate the motion pictures. He wrote:

> "Perhaps the most effective way for the parent, the educator, or the religious worker to evaluate the content of motion pictures in terms of child and youth needs is to consider the objectives of the church, the home, and school on the one hand, and the content of the motion picture on the other. If this is done one sees readily that at certain points these three agencies receive aid from the motion picture. However, far too often the objectives of the motion picture are inimical to those of the church, the home, and the school."[157]

Dale argued that should school, church, or home wish to better understand what was happening to the minds of the young when watching motion pictures, they ought to consider the influences shaping the American public mind. He granted the messages of

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[156] For more on the work of Edgar Dale, see Nichols (2006, 2013). For scholarship on how film appreciation methods were developed in Great Britain, see Bolas (2009). In contrast to American film appreciation movements, film appreciation methods were quite marginalized in Great Britain, as the industry did not provide much financial support or legitimation, nor did universities include such courses in their course offerings.

[157] Dale, 1935, p228.

motion pictures some objectivity, and positioned them as working against those messages of other, more trusted, institutions. In other words, one should be wary about what children were being taught, not taught, or mis-taught, by the motion picture. This didactic apprehension of cinema saw the potential harm encoded in them, but ultimately argued the same medium could be used to teach and reinforce desirable messages by stressing production of the type of content Dale's analysis evidenced were under-represented. In step with the overall aims of the MPRC and the Payne Fund Studies, this argument obfuscated the claims and arguments for censoring movies. For Dale, no matter whose hands the motion pictures were in, the final criterion for evaluating their worth ought not be monetary but symbolic: "Does it make life richer, more meaningful, more enjoyable?" Dale asked readers to ask themselves (1935: 230). Figure 1 illustrates the ways in which Dale felt motion pictures could teach better conduct, yet he did not put any explicit limit on appropriate content per se. He concluded his monograph with the thought that, "[n]o human problem which is fitted to the motion-picture medium ought to be excluded from the screen. The motion-picture screen, a parade of life and manners, should be a study of conduct, honestly, dramatically, and entertainingly presented" (1935: 230).

BALANCE SHEET FOR MOTION-PICTURE CONTENT

The following aspects or problems have received attention, sometimes excessive, in the motion pictures.	*The following aspects or problems have received scant attention in the motion pictures.*
Life of the upper economic strata	Life of the middle and lower economic strata
Metropolitan localities	Small town and rural areas
Problems of the unmarried and young	Problems of the married, middle aged, and old
Problems of love, sex, and crime	Other problems of everyday life
Motif of escape and entertainment	Motif of education and social enlightenment
Interest appeal to young adults	Interest appeal to children and older adults
Professional and commercial world	Industrial and agricultural world
Personal problems in a limited field	Occupational and governmental problems
Comedy foreigner such as the dumb Swede	Representative foreigner such as the worker, business man, farmer
Diverse and passive recreations	Active and inexpensive recreations
Individual and personal goals	Social goals
Variety of crimes and crime techniques	Causes and cures of crime
Emphasis on the romance and unusual in friendship	Emphasis on the undramatic and enduring in friendship
The "lived happily ever after" idea following an unusual and romantic courtship	Happy marriages shown as a result of companionship and careful planning
Physical beauty	Beauty of character
Emphasis on physical action	Increased skill in analysis of motives and portrayal of character
Sports and trivial matters frequently shown in newsreels	World news of an intellectual and perhaps undramatic type, results of scientific findings, pictures of real conditions in the different parts of the world.

Figure 3) Balance sheet from Dale's The Content of Motion Pictures *(1935: 229).*

Dale presented the findings of his content analysis as a balance sheet, indicating his overall conceptualization of media and its influence. The form visualized Dale's larger argument that some lifestyles, situations, and stations in life were over-represented, and that a balanced, more inclusive cinema would atone for this by including other stories from other stations in life (namely here the less socio-economically fortunate). This criticism of media

and its distance from the lived experiences of viewers and demographic realities has

become entrenched in contemporary academic regards on media.[158]

However, the preferred one-to-one parity between on and off screen experiences was not

applied evenly to the movies. Dale's stance on the effects of cinema became less clear as he

shifted from the example of courtship patterns in cinema to the depiction of crime. In the

case of crime he did not make a demand for an even par between cinematic depictions of

crime and statistics on rates of crime in the U.S., but instead urged viewers to ask

themselves about the depiction of the crime and the explanations presented in the film for

the committing of crime. Crime should not be omitted from the screen then, as Dale

hoped a cinema that depicted the costs of crime not just to the individual but society at

large might foster a commitment among viewers to improve extant social order. In

discerning such beneficial crime films Dale suggested viewers pose the following questions

of crime movies as:

1. Did it give some insight as to the fundamental causes of criminal behavior?
2. Did it show the strong and weak points of our present methods of legal justice?
3. Did it leave the impression that punishing the criminal solves the problem of crime?
4. Did it show the great inadequacies of our modern methods of handling criminals in our jails and penitentiaries?[159]

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[158] For example, by comparing aspects of racial and ethnic representativeness in media to relevant demographic and quantitative societal data, social scientists and media scholars continuously offer the finding that the discrepancy between media depictions and actual states of affairs are egregious, often leading to the conclusion – and argument – that some more balanced parity must be achieved. The implicit notion is that should viewers see characters and situations on screen that are more similar to themselves, they may be induced or more disposed to learn certain behaviors or attitudes. If exposed to characters or situations which are far from their own, they will be left desiring ends they are unlikely to achieve, potentially becoming desperate to achieve such ends as a result.

[159] See Dale 1933, p215.

Citing a presidential report, "Report on the Causes of Crime," by the National

Commission on Law Observance and Enforcement Overall, Dale guided viewers to

question whether the movies treated crime honestly and accurately in comparison to what

scholarship offered as explanations for crime. This is a key step in the transformation of

moral ambiguity from a danger into a resource. He also encouraged viewers to question

what the causes of crime were and whether they were depicted appropriately in the films as

the basis for deciding whether a film that dealt with crime was appropriate. Dale also

placed an emphasis on social goals and the causes and cures of crime, as opposed to

individual and personal goals and the depiction of a variety of crimes and techniques, was

sorely needed. Cinema should not seek to depict real life realistically but depict real life

problems such as crime in a way that would shine light on possible and potential solutions.

"A truthful and accurate account which showed causes and consequences in a large social

sense might aid in the solution of the crime problem," he suggested (1935: 153). Thus,

while making better pictures could relieve moral ambiguity, viewers could also take an

active part in transforming moral ambiguity into a resource for bettering their viewer

habits.

Proper consumption of cinema was not only important for the contentment of viewers

with their own stations and lots in life, but was also critical for the responsible

participation of every citizen in society. In this way Dale apportioned the viewer with a

brand of responsible viewership that was not limited to the interaction between the viewer

and the screen, the viewer and her or himself, but reached even further to the interaction

between viewer and nation. Addressing the common rebuttal that cinema was not created by the industry as an educational tool with a social value but a vehicle for entertainment and escapism, he argued:

> "This attempt to fit people to live in our current world by temporarily paralyzing their mental and emotional natures at a time when, as never before, we need to make minds clearer, is an abdication of the responsibility of every citizen. This temporary paralysis, this temporary flight from reality, this running away from the world, not merely postpones the solution of the problem but actually may unfit that individual to take his place as a responsible member of society."[160]

He also wrote, "The power of any nation lies in its ability vigorously and straightforwardly to attack the critical problems of life. If motion pictures thwart or devitalize this power, they deserve only our strongest condemnation" (1935: 152). This points to an area of thought where Dale had something in common with censors: if something was harmful to citizens, to the nation, to society, it required strong condemnation. While this was the starting point for the censors' approach to their work, encoded in their legal and bureaucratic tools for controlling cinematic fare in the state of New York and beyond from 1922-1965 (see chapter 2), film appreciation scholars developed their approach to cinema in a different direction, wherein citizens were activated and responsibilized to make their own judgments and evaluations of cinematic narratives.

Dale's approach to cinema, and the path his work set for subsequent film appreciation literature, involved an attempt to create good citizens who could both carefully evaluate the media they consumed and make effective demands for better cinematic content (as a result of their careful evaluations). In the mean time, better content would more accurately

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[160] Dale 1935, p151-152.

reflect the lives and situations of those Dale identified as under-represented in motion pictures. This was the social value of cinema, emphasized over an entertainment value telos of cinema. Where New York State censors distributed no decision-making authority, or moral responsibility, to the viewer, they responsibilized themselves to perform such evaluative work. This position was associated with a pessimistic telos of cinema, one that continually wavered between more or less unacceptable messages, a somewhat dim and dark perspective on the medium. Film appreciation scholars on the other hand positioned the viewer as capable of evaluating the moral standing of narratives, especially with the aid of film appreciation techniques.

It is important to note that Dale did not feel cinema should be conceptualized in such a way as to depart entirely from the realm of entertainment. Once we begin to think of entertainment purely as models for life we are lost, he warned, highlighting the sense in which the nature of the medium was still unclear. To this end, Dale quoted an observer of the industry, journalist William S. Cunningham. On the one hand Dale noted that the images of men and women were, thanks to the expert make up craftsmen, lighting professionals, and wardrobe designers perhaps too perfect. On the other hand he quoted, "I'm not campaigning for sloppy imperfection or asking that the movies strip their stories of glamour. And I most certainly am not waging any war against pretty women. But I do feel that the Hollywood product could be improved by striving for real realism" (Dale 1935: 83). This was meant to be humorous, suggesting no self-respecting man would wage

war against attractive women depicted on the screen, but that some sense of realism was needed to improve Hollywood product.

This social value differed from the fearful didactic telos of cinema encoded in the work of the New York censors in the positioning of viewers to cinema and their interpretive abilities, as well as in the source of moral repercussion it anticipated. Censors were concerned about the depiction of institutions and societal mores, protecting citizen viewers from images that would offend their sensibilities, suggest that certain offenses were tolerable, or weaken faith in the social order. This was the potential moral repercussion of improper viewership, the source of incorrectness stemming from the tension between the narrative and normative view of societal structures. This differed greatly from the source of tension that concerned the film appreciation perspective, where the gulf between experience and image was the mainspring from which the moral repercussions of improper cinematic consumption arose. Film appreciation endorsed a more sophisticated and yet tenuous approach to decoding the moral value of a film, and invoked a viewer who could be taught to see for one self. I will say more about these two strands of thought in the teachings of film appreciation below.

Dale's second contribution to the Payne Fund Studies was written in the form of a manual, titled *How to Appreciate Motion Pictures* (1933). This manual was intended for both high school students as well as adults. In his introduction to the volume, Dale wrote:

> "The results of the investigations reported in companion volumes in this series demonstrate conclusively the effect of the motion picture on children's information, attitudes, and conduct. It is hoped that this volume will provide a necessary corrective to possible harmful results, and provide

audiences for those films which sincerely and honestly convey significant interpretations of the world in which we live."[161]

This introductory note included many of the themes that formed an integral part of Dale's pedagogical philosophy on motion picture instruction. The major focus of the manual was to present readers with evaluative guidelines, or questions, through which the reader might come to their own conclusion of the moral value and worth of a specific film. This was a very individualized approach, with a heavy emphasis on valuing one's own opinion over those of the critic, reviewer, or any other more popular or authoritative voice. "It is better to have tastes which others may think are inferior, but which are your own, than hypocritically to accept tastes which are considered superior when they are not really yours at all," Dale instructed the reader (1933: 8). His overarching agenda with the manual was two-pronged: to teach students to pick out good from poor films and only attend the former, and to foster a deeper appreciation for film by teaching students filmmaking techniques.

Dale ended each chapter with a series of "problems and activities," a series of questions or exercises that were designed to stimulate the student to agree or disagree, and explain why. By presenting examples of these problems and activities here, I will continue referring to the articulation of the viewer as reformer, who was both a unique individual and yet in need of soft guidance in order to truly, and properly, appreciate the motion pictures. Through these exercises it was hoped readers would develop critical viewing skills, which would buffer them from the moral repercussions of improper exposure to cinema. (This

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[161] Dale 1933, vi.

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articulation of the viewer will be picked up again in chapter 5, as the equation shifted from one of personal experience and film appreciation guidance to personal experience coupled with psychological and scholarly expertise.)

Dale dedicated several chapters to the art and craft of filmmaking, on such topics such as movie lots and studios, acting, photography, settings, or directing, and left small sentences and paragraphs throughout which reveal his normative expectations for cinematic content. A premium was placed on realism and believability in this instruction on the craft of filmmaking. Dialogue, for example, should be judged by its "naturalness," as its "chief purpose...is to create the illusion of reality" (1933: 172); settings should be evaluated by way of the reality they impart. "Did you notice any errors in the historical settings?" Dale asked readers, continuing, "When scenes were laid in industrial, commercial, or agricultural settings, was there an attempt made to give the audience a great deal of insight into life in these fields? If not, could it have been done?" (1933: 170). Dale made the case for appreciating realism in other technical and artistic aspects of filmmaking, including research, attention to detail, and believability (though he made a noticeable exception for animated films). When it came to sets, costumes, or comportment, Dale instructed readers to demand historical accuracy. Reality (or its illusion) was a central theme and a core element of this philosophy of film appreciation.

As mentioned above, the illusion of reality was compared with different data and perceptions of lived reality in order to evaluate how proper or good the reality illusion was,

sharpening the lines between on and off screen realities and positioning such difference as a mechanism for potential moral repercussions. He warned readers that, while motion pictures were thought to possess entertainment values only, there were unintended consequences of attending a film without considering its merits beforehand. In developing one's own standards for shopping for motion pictures the value of the motion pictures could be decoded and proper cinematic consumption could be practiced.

Following this logic, the manual was dedicated to encouraging the reader to develop a habit of reading about films and doing research on a title before attending it. Dale argued that being a better movie shopper would raise the level of all movie production. This discourse of shopping for movies associated his ideas of the viewer with consumerism, and the notion of movies as products. In a chapter concluding series of questions, Dale suggested the reader who was concerned with shopping for their movies better compare the ads for a film with the film itself. "Were they truthful?" he asked the reader (1933: 25). He also asked readers to compare their own reviews of a film with those published in newspapers. In posing questions about what the value of a movie review might be, Dale argued that a proper movie review ought to include some interpretation, stating, "The writer ought to have something important to say about the interpretation of the motion picture" (1933: 72).

Students should also keep track of pictures that had both high entertainment and social value. Here the consumer, in the figure of the movie shopper, was responsibilized and

activated to reflect on their observations of marketing and product, and compare promise with delivery. They were instructed to think of films as having types of value, the common entertainment or social value distinction, and to think more seriously about the importance of the latter value over the former. Some of the questions Dale proposed in about reviews were complex:

> "Can there be just one set of standards to be applied to a motion picture which would definitely label it as good, bad, or indifferent? Would one be desirable?"; "Should all the books in a good library be suitable for children to read? Why?"; or "Score pictures on a one- to four-star basis and see how well members of your class or a group of your friends agree on what they call a good picture."[162]

Here the student was encouraged to formulate their own opinions of a film on paper, to compare their opinions with their peers and family, and to question how standardized and impersonal standards for determining the value of a film ought to be.

For Dale, plots were to be believable, never illogical. Plots ought to be reasonable, unless the genre relied on illogical storylines as a convention. He set a high bar for the evaluation of a movie's story in a small sub-section titled, "What is a Good Story?" He wrote, "They ought to give you an honest interpretation of these important problems which will be significant for your life, furnish you with a sympathetic insight into the lives of persons who have differing standards of conduct, and truthfully show you the consequences of having those standards" (1933: 86). He ended his chapter on story with a set of standards he wished readers would revise should they not fit their own standards. These were the following:

1. A good motion-picture story must really do what it sets out to do.

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[162] See Dale 1933, p72-73.

2. The story should be so built that there is a consistent rise in interest from the beginning of the picture until the climax.
3. A well-constructed motion picture should not be hard to follow or understand.
4. Any problem which is presented in a serious motion picture should be presented accurately.
5. Such a picture might end happily or unhappily, as long as the ending is logical.
6. Humor in motion pictures should not be consistently built up at the expense of certain races or nationalities.
7. Further, the humor should fit naturally into the situations and should not be used merely as relief.
8. One of the most important things the motion picture can do is to show you truthfully the consequences that come from making certain choices in life.[163]

These standards and normative expectations for cinema made for a conventional, if somewhat strict, case for what the motion picture was supposed to achieve, and how. Dale placed limits on the structure of a film's story, on the accuracy with which "problems" were depicted in a film, correct and incorrect forms of humor, and the ultimate value of what motion pictures ought to "do," affect, or achieve. This perspective circumscribed the interpretation of moral appropriate-ness in films to a specific realm of narrative depiction and attendant moral messages, limited to narratives that were located close enough to the viewer's personal experiences to be decipherable by them. Appropriateness became person- and experience-specific, and relied on the active reflection of the viewer. Thus they were granted a stake in the exercise of interpreting morality.

The development of film appreciation positioned film as a vehicle of potentially valuable messages. Edgar Dale's contributions to the Payne Fund Studies activated researchers and viewers as key components in the endeavor of screen cleaning. Through careful content analysis, exemplified by Dale but reproducible and replicable by any other interested researcher or individual viewer, appropriate pressure could be placed on the industry to

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[163] See Dale 1933, p95-96.

create the sorts of content that were sorely misrepresented among Hollywood products. At the same time, viewers could be taught methods for discerning immorality on their own, becoming their own sort of moral arbiter. This would shift production trends, bringing about a cinema that inspired a desire to maintain or improve the social and moral order among viewers. The understanding of moral repercussion embedded in the methods of film appreciation and content analysis drifted between a universal sense of moral right and wrong, and a primacy of personal opinion in establishing filth from purity.

The pseudo-relative positioning of morality, whereby personal experience and opinion of the viewer was placed in dialogue with the views of professional reviewers and researchers, resonates with the work of the contemporary rating organization, Common Sense Media. The viewer as personal moral arbiter was a specific articulation of audiences and moral definition in the larger realm of the methods of content control engaged in by cultural intermediaries. It is important this development not be understood as progressing from more explicit forms of censorship; rather it occurred alongside it, and endured when formal, official, and public forms of censorship were deemed no longer palatable, defensible, or acceptable. Cinema was situated as a malleable medium of moral harm as well as moral gain, relying on the viewer to detect and determine which way a narrative should be viewed, as well as whether it should be viewed at all. In this way, cinema was elevated to the status of a medium through which society stood to make enormous gains, should it produce and circulate the types of narratives viewers labeled appropriate.

4.5) Cinema as an educational institution

Aside from Edgar Dale and the work of education scholars, other researchers were also interested in and intrigued by the effects of the cinema on audiences. Sociologists were interested in the phenomenon of the motion picture, and the nation's fascination for them. While generally unsupportive of claims for censorship, early sociologists studying cinema and morality were also not optimistic about the viewers' ability to watch cinema with a critical gaze. The first sociologists to study the relationship between on-screen and off-screen morality were tied to the University of Chicago, including faculty member Herbert Blumer, and a graduate student who went on to become faculty at New York University, Frederic Thrasher. Here I will discuss the approaches adopted by each scholar to cinema and off-screen life, paying specific attention to the scant responsibility they expected viewers to perform in discerning moral repercussion for themselves. These examples are important because they offer evidence of how researchers attempted to articulate an issue that had been heavily politicized in more scholarly, abstract language, thereby removing the topic from the realm of policy recommendations or mobilizing efforts and advancing a somewhat flat type of viewer.

I will begin with the work of Blumer, before discussing the seminar and program at New York University established by Thrasher. Blumer found that pictures affected everyone but brought in a class element, and argued both that those with higher levels of education were less influenced by the flickering images on the screen, and that the social context and institutions one interacted with were as important for interpretations of cinema as

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cinematic texts themselves. Thrasher found that both viewers and context mattered, but film appreciation techniques, taught to educators, would bring about the most societal gains through cinema viewership. While both scholars found that movies were educational tools, the question was how to harness them.

Blumer and his co-authors contributed two volumes to the Payne Fund Studies, *Movies and Conduct* and *Movies, Delinquency and Crime* (both published in 1933). This discussion will focus on the former, for which Blumer is better known. He began with the premise that movies affected viewers' lives, and established proof of this by presenting the fervent writings and reflections on film by participants in Blumer's study, the authors of the movie autobiographies he collected (i.e. students at the University of Chicago). Blumer openly dispensed with conventional research methods and collected these first-hand accounts of movie-going experiences in order to, "illuminate the kinds of ways in which motion pictures touch the lives of young people" (1933: 8). Certainly an innovative method for the time, later scholarship on this research has raised troubling questions as to Blumer's research practices. Archival documents reveal a tendency to quote the same autobiographies in different publications, attributing quotes from the same autobiography to different authors. For example, one movie autobiography is cited twice in Blumer's *Movies and Conduct*, first identifying the writer as, "female, 19, white college junior," and the second time as, "female, 20, Jewish college sophomore."[164] Were these instances of mislabeling intentional, or accidental? Was it a strategy to protect the writer's identity, or

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[164] See Jowett et al. (1996) for more on this, as well as several full motion picture autobiographies. Another motion picture autobiography's writer was first identified as, "female, 20, white college sophomore," a second time as, "male, 20, white, Jewish, college junior," and yet a third time as, "female, 21, white college junior."

an attempt to give the appearance of a larger collection of data than Blumer had? While

the answers to these questions are perhaps obscured forever, they are important ones to

pose.

Weighing in on the larger debate about how motion pictures were to be conceptualized,

Blumer located movies not as entertainment devices, but educational tools, based on his

collected autobiographies. "These considerations," he wrote, referring to the

autobiographies:

> "establish motion pictures as an incitant (sic) to conduct as well as a pacifier of feelings. It is insufficient to regard motion pictures simply as a fantasy world by participating in which an individual softens the ardor of his life and escapes its monotony and hardships, nor to justify their content and "unreality" on this basis. For to many the pictures are authentic portrayals of life, from which they draw patterns of behavior, stimulation to overt conduct, content for a vigorous life of imagination, and ideas of reality. They are not merely a device for surcease; they are a form of stimulation."[165]

The respondents highlighted shifting relationships to cinema as their stations in life

shifted, noting how they were repulsed or unconcerned with romantic pictures as children

only to become very interested in them as adolescents. Yet for Blumer and reader alike,

the specifics of how their conduct was affected remained a mystery. Based on the data,

Blumer hypothesized that where adolescents were provided with less coherent narratives

for the next phases of their lives, the movies and their narratives became more salient. But

where institutions had greater power to "mold" behavior, more emotional detachment

could be found.

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[165] Blumer 1933, p196.

This power allegedly gave individuals more immunity to the movies. On this point he wrote:

> "The influence of motion pictures upon the mind and conduct of the adolescent is more understandable if we appreciate this condition – to wit, that he is confronted with a new life to whose demands he is not prepared to respond in a ready and self-satisfying way; and that he is experiencing a new range of desires and interests which are pressing for some form of satisfaction … Motion pictures show in intimate detail and with alluring appeal forms of life in which he is interested … In a sense, motion pictures organize his needs and suggest lines of conduct useful for their satisfaction."[166]

Blumer thus located two sites for the problem of morality and cinema, the first in the context of viewers' lives, and the second the exacerbation of such insecurity by exposure to the wrong sorts of movies. Yet the autobiographies remain under-analyzed in the volume, employed as qualitative adornments rather than opportunities for analytical advancement. Despite this, his contribution to the research project remains the single-most frequently cited study published.

Echoing the discourse of other educators and researchers around cinema at the time, such as Edgar Dale, Blumer felt there was a divergence of standards between the movie-going public, the consumers of movies, and the creators of the movies. He also positioned movies as an educational institution, not one which imparted detached knowledge but one that was interpreted by viewers as introducing and acquainting them with types of life which they may desire. Motion pictures provided roles for the viewer to assume. They elicited and directed viewers' impulses, and provided the general substance of their emotions and ideas. Yet the problem was precisely this educational aspect of the motion pictures, as evidenced when Blumer wrote:

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[166] Blumer 1933, p195.

> "Because motion pictures are educational in this sense, they may conflict with other educational institutions. They may challenge what other institutions take for granted. The schemes of conduct which they present may not only fill gaps left by the school, by the home, and by the church, but they may also cut athwart the standards and values which these latter institutions seek to inculcate ... This is likely to be true chiefly among those with least education and sophisticated experience."[167]

Thus, the underlying assumption with which Blumer began his research was that the movies were a source of information that was uncontrolled, much different in this regard from information received by adolescents and youth from the home, church, or school. Viewers were especially susceptible to the influence of motion pictures when their lives were on the cusp of change, and when they came from lower socio-economic backgrounds. In contrast to the work of Edgar Dale, this conception of motion pictures rendered their influence other, uncontrolled, and untraditional, arising at moments when viewers were attuned to new desires and seeking instruction on the next phases of their lives. In this sense Blumer's orientation assumed a harmful relationship between viewer and screen.

No amount of aesthetic value could alleviate the tension created in the gulf between on and off-screen lives, rendering the immorality of motion pictures indefensible. Both Dale and Blumer's contributions delineated types of cinematic dirt, as both were concerned with the discord between experience and image. But while Dale felt such discord could be employed as a mechanism for discerning proper from improper movie consumption, Blumer offered no strong suggestion for morally responsibilizing one position, role, or viewer over another. He acknowledged that motion pictures were educational institutions that taught people how to behave, yet concluded by relying on a class distinction, finding

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[167] Blumer 1933, 197.

that motion pictures had less of an influence on the "cultured classes" than on others – though they still had an influence on all viewers in general. This class element maintained the already commonplace articulation of the vulnerable viewer as the working class viewer who could not so easily distinguish right from wrong, and responsibilized upper class viewers as more intelligent and capable of properly viewing cinema due to their access to higher education.

While the motion pictures were educational and instructional in their effects, one's education was relevant for how one was educated by the movies. Blumer noted however that the difference here was not about whether or not one was affected at all by the movies, or the general experiences one had with the movies, but rather the degree of influence movies had on viewers and how this related to their socio-economic backgrounds. This contrasted with the work of fellow sociologist Frederic Thrasher, who also located cinema as an educational tool but rather than beginning from a negative association between on- and off-screen conduct, Thrasher and his colleagues positioned the didactic quality of cinema as one which could be harnessed and directed to achieve better societal outcomes. I will discuss these differences by looking at Thrasher's publications in the mid-1930s, as well as his work with the Committee on Social Values in Motion Pictures, drawing contrasts between Thrasher's articulation and localization of viewer responsibility to the work of Blumer and Dale.

Two special issues of the *Journal of Educational Sociology* were dedicated to the topic of cinema and viewership. The first, published in November 1936, was titled, "The Motion Picture in its Educational and Social Aspects." The second, published in November 1937, was titled, "Educational Aspects of the Motion Picture." Contributing to the first issue on the importance of the motion picture for sociologists, Thrasher argued, "To understand its educational and sociological significance … one must consider the nature of the art which it represents" (1936: 129). What was intended by the term "nature" for Thrasher was a discussion of qualities of cinema in order to weigh in on the debate about what cinema was. Was it a form of sophisticated, artistic expression, or a commercial product, producing unimportant and cheap entertainment for the decidedly less-than-intelligent? Arguing, like Blumer, for the former, Thrasher described the wide range of communicative flexibilities afforded by the cinema, such as its lack of restriction by time or space (as compared to the theater), and its ability to pass into fantastical realms, and argued cinema had an ability to make psychological impressions on its viewers with an ease other mediums could not.[168] While Thrasher applauded the development of educational guides to cinematic productions as well as the spread of photo appreciation clubs, he felt the problem was that educators did not embrace the educational aspects of cinema with enough conviction.

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[168] For example, animation was found by Thrasher to be impressive because of its ability to "[vividly] … [depict] the common elements of human nature and the foibles of mankind, whether under the guise of household pets, barnyard animals, or inanimate objects which are given a chance to express themselves" (1936: 131).

Thrasher supported the cultivation of school appreciation clubs for film, such as those

advanced by Edgar Dale and his followers, but was also supportive of the work of the

Committee on Social Values in Motion Pictures (CSVMP), an organization of educators,

researchers, scholars, and clergymen who were similarly interested in understanding how

motion pictures influenced viewers. The list of people involved in the CSVMP included

figures such as Jane Addams, as well as scholars that had more explicit educational interests

in the cinema, such as Edgar Dale, Chicago sociologists Robert E. Park and Ellsworth

Faris, and others such as Robert Woodworth at the Social Science Research Council.

There were also social psychologists and other academic disciplines represented. But

unlike the Payne Fund Studies scholars, or Edgar Dale's film appreciation scholarship, the

CSVMP maintained official relations with the industry's Motion Picture Producers and

Distributors Association (the current–day MPAA), and emphasized the role of teachers and

instruction through cinema above all other viewers and types of viewer-based reflections.

The Committee on Social Values in Motion Pictures coordinated with the MPPDA to

compose a list of scenes that the committee felt were exemplary, for "fruitful" discussion

between teachers and pupils. This committee also compiled the film *Secrets of Success*, a

pastiche of clips of successful Hollywood products, re-edited and repurposed for explicitly

educational angles. Thrasher noted:

> "Some of the moral values which the pupils are expected to develop through discussion under
> teacher guidance are: social democracy, responsibility for peace, unselfishness, meaning of
> friendship, mutual understanding between parents and children, satisfactions in work well done,
> patriotism, kindness to animals, dynamic purpose in life, bad effects of divorce on life of child,
> mutual obligations necessary in family life, loyalty, intelligent respect for law, fortitude in the face of
> adversity, reliability, cooperation, and the necessity for long and painstaking preparation for

the tasks of life."[169]

This would be accomplished through the use of manuals, outlines, and posters circulated to educators and accompanying the film's screening. It was the repurposed audio-visual images and the accompanying textual materials, as well as the conversations with students that would yield the results for this beneficial didactic outcome. This contrasted sharply with Dale's responsibilization of the viewer. Here, the teacher, educational pamphlet, and classroom were activated as stimulants of appropriate moral learning through cinema. The CSVMP and experts associated with it were charged with the responsibility of identifying moral values in cinema and packaging and presenting them in digestible ways to teachers for further distribution, instillation, and inculcation among students.

Thrasher also had expectations for how motion picture instruction would shape a better civil society, echoing the sentiments of the Motion Picture Division censors discussed in chapter 2. He wrote:

> "The motion picture is important to the social-science teacher in elucidating social processes which are difficult to present through the printed or spoken word. The photoplay has an added advantage of being able to evoke appropriate emotional responses which will reinforce attitudes necessary to enlightened and useful citizenship."[170]

Later he wrote, "Since the entertainment film has such an enormous weekly audience in this country and such a profound effect upon the minds of both children and adults it is important that its content and the way in which its subject matter is presented be of such quality as to promote the objectives of education for wholesome citizenship" (1936: 140-

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[169] Thrasher 1936, p139.

[170] Thrasher 1936, 140.

141). Similar to the work of the scholars presented above, Thrasher condemned legal censorship, and argued instead for a position similar to that maintained by Dale (and it is worth pointing out, other motion picture "activists" before him, such as the work of the National Board of Review). "A more effective, although slower process of arriving at truly entertaining, artistically adequate, and socially valid pictures is through public education which will result in the support of good films at the box office," Thrasher argued a few years later, in the same journal (1940: 300). "Many groups have expressed the importance of this technique and have undertaken programs of 'selection rather than censorship'" (ibid.).

The method of teaching viewers to patronize the better films would enable the box office to speak for itself, applying pressure to the industry to change in a subtle way. "Such increased patronage for good pictures will register at the box office and the producers will be encouraged to make more and more pictures of a superior quality," he maintained (1936: 141). But Thrasher was not as flexible or individualistic in his approach to identifying or employing film for creating a more desirable civil society. Rather, he supported the repurposing of film by experts for a higher aim, as opposed to teaching the student to shop for those movies that were already produced in such a way as to achieve a higher aim. Experts, such as the CSVMP, were responsibilized to discern for the viewer which desirable social messages could be gleaned from which films. This position also assumed a generic, society-wide understanding of desirable moral messages, and disallowed

any localizing of cinematic meaning. This stood in contradistinction to Dale's position that viewers could be responsibilized to localize such findings in their own experiences.

After completing his Ph.D. on gangs in Chicago in the 1920s, Thrasher took a position at New York University's Steinhardt School of Education, where he was also the technical director of the Metropolitan Motion Picture Council (MMPC) in the late 1930s. The MMPC described itself as, "an autonomous group devoted to information about the cinema (affiliated with the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures)."[171] This council was based at New York University, and had strong ties to the National Board of Review, also based in the city. The MMPC organized conferences and offered a seminar on the motion picture. He invited dozens of guest speakers to address his class, the syllabus reading like a "Who's Who" of the educational world of cinema at the time, ranging from the well-known publisher Martin J. Quigley to cinema engineers. Advertised as a pioneering course on film appreciation at the college level, the syllabus stated, "Given by distinguished lecturers under the joint auspices of the University and the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures, this course COVERS THE WHOLE FIELD – ARTISTIC, TECHNICAL, EDUCATIONAL, SOCIAL. It presents an indispensible orientation in motion pictures, both entertainment and educational."[172] By this it was not intended that cinema was both entertaining and educational, but rather that there were two types of cinema, entertainment *or* educational. "A practical course," the syllabus promised, "The

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[171] MMPC Bulletin, February 1938, Columbia University, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Pare Lorentz Papers, box 96, folder 16 "Metropolitan Motion Picture Council" (PLP hereon).

[172] Syllabus for academic year 1938-193, . PLP, Box 96, folder 24, "National Board of Review."

course is especially useful to the teacher, to the social worker, and to the laymen working in community motion-picture programs because it discusses practical problems of schools, social agencies, and community organizations in relation to films both of entertainment and of educational types."[173]

Among its other activities, the MMPC also produced a bulletin that discussed news items around censorship decisions and other relevant topics. More pertinent for the discussion at hand, the MMPC produced lists and surveys of types of films and the positive depictions associated with them. In 1939 the Metropolitan Motion Picture Council compiled and published a survey of titles focused specifically on positive depictions of various ethnic groups living in the United States. The survey began as a request from the Service Bureau for Intercultural Education.[174] The Bureau's mission was to disseminate all recent social scientific research on intercultural education to its members. A key element of this orientation was to combat prejudice by emphasizing the contributions of various ethnic groups to a democratic American society. By evidencing differing religious and racial groups, educators at the Service Bureau wished to foster discussions of equality as citizens and Americans among all social and ethnic groups. This intention resonated with the survey compiled by the Metropolitan Motion Picture Council, as the survey was to highlight, "existing films dealing with the contributions of various culture groups in American life" (Wehburg 1939: 2). The list was constructed by asking Hollywood studios, chambers of commerce, foreign consulates, and "key people in the culture group field" for

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[173] Ibid.

[174] The Bureau was a committee within the Progressive Education Association, established in 1935.

titles that met such criteria. (There was an element of self-representation in the list as a result, combining both Hollywood products and non-theatrical titles as a result). Here, a theory of educational multiculturalism, or cultures, was at play.

In celebrating certain titles over others, viewers should watch films from various groups and learn to respect them. The list gave information on the titles, the studio or organization responsible for its production and distribution, and a one-sentence synopsis, with the list representing titles on Chinese, Danish, Negro, and Scotch populations in the United States. The MMPC also recommended certain titles in the list. These were films that were thought to better society, in both their being viewed and, ultimately, by way of discussion about them. Viewers were encouraged to watch such films, deemed to be cinematic material that enabled communities to gather and grow. But this line of logic also reified cultures as essential ways of behaving and being, ways that while different on the surface could be reconciled in their over-arching contributions to American democratic life.

These tools, of conferences, practical courses on multiple aspects of cinema, and lists of films with desirable depictions of various cultural groups, assumed a different type of viewer and scholar necessary in order to achieve a better society through cinematic instruction. Where they differed was in the way they engaged with the moral ambiguity of cinema. Was it a tool to be taken by the viewer themselves, or a threat to the viewer who watched cinema in lower-class, less educated, or more isolated contexts? These differences

are exposed by the attention I have paid here to the activated viewer of Dale's film

appreciation scholarship and the viewer who was at the mercy of context, structure, and

social institutions, articulated by Blumer. That all three of these scholars were associated

with the Payne Fund Studies speaks to the multi-faceted way in which cinema and its

morality were encoded in the Payne Fund Studies.

4.6) Creating better citizens through cinema

Media is still thought today to possess a didactic quality. Various interpreters of such

qualities often express their thoughts with the wish that media would reflect other realities

and experiences missing from the mainstream view. There is an underlying belief that such

depictions would be beneficial to viewers buoying these claims. Such contemporary

assertions echo the work of the Metropolitan Motion Picture Council, and scholars such as

Edgar Dale, Herbert Blumer, and Frederic Thrasher. There is a sense of realism that

continues to be associated with modes of evaluating cinema and its relationship to citizens,

consumers, and viewers. Media evaluators and commentators of yore often had a sense of

realism, which, they claim, is either not being reflected in the media (a perspective often

espoused by scholars and media educators), or a sense that reality is threatened by its

perversely real image on the screen (the censor). Yet how were social orientations,

identities, and expectations for the medium tied into their evaluations?

Here I have connected the work of researchers and advocates for a cleaner screen to the

evaluative systems utilized in their research. In particular, I emphasized the ways in which

viewers and scholars were or were not responsibilized, and underlined ways in which the

constitution of dirt and clean cinematic fare were to be handled. Some, such as the

censors discussed in the previous chapter, sought to eliminate moral ambiguity and

cinematic filth altogether. Others, such as the education scholars, attempted to teach

viewers to distinguish cinematic dirt from cleanliness. They highlighted the particularly

volatile contextual and structural conditions that could exacerbate exposure to cinematic

dirt, energized educators, instructors, and community leaders to lead the way in

distinguishing dirt from cleanliness, and delineated strategies for presenting films to

audiences, or audiences to films. This chapter demonstrated that the attempt to educate

viewers or educators on what was clean and what was filth constructed a more active type

of viewership, and began to transform moral ambiguity into a benefit for the viewer instead

of a risk.

This chapter also presented variations on the positive didactic qualities cinema was capable

of imparting on its viewers. How the citizen consumer was positioned in relation to the

cinematic text brings certain differences to light, as does a consideration of whether they

were in need of some form of expert knowledge to guide them. Were they individuals who

ought to develop their own sense of desirable and undesirable in their cinematic

experiences, and become better movie shoppers (à la Dale)? Was is that producers and

consumers were so far apart that, without solving this issue in the off-screen world, there

was not much hope for more on- and off-screen parity (à la Blumer)? Or were viewers

unintentionally passive, able to be jolted into better viewership practices through the use of

specific clips and questionnaires provided by properly educated teachers, instructors, and community leaders (à la Thrasher)?

The telos of cinema as a potential gain for society presented in the work of those associated with the Payne Fund Studies offers a sharp comparison with the telos of cinema and education encoded in the work of New York State censors. In the examples presented here, morality was afforded various levels of interpretability and localized construction by viewers themselves. Social institutions and the context of viewers came to play an important role in the process of evaluating cinema for moral appropriateness, and reducing moral ambiguity. None of these factors or abilities was permissible in the work of the censors discussed in chapter 3, incompatible with a telos of cinema that understood it as always potentially dangerous, as opposed to always potentially valuable. For social science scholars in the 1930s, exposure to cinema was figured as an unavoidable deluge of examples, scenarios, and situations that constantly surrounded audiences. Teaching audiences or educators how to think about cinema was a far more effective – and American – way of going about media morality, one which capitalized on the underlying positive benefits waiting to be reaped by society through the proper consumption of cinema.

Censorship at a federal or state level somehow missed the point, the ultimate telos of cinema, by disallowing viewers and educators any ability to interpret and locate the meaning of cinematic texts, either for themselves or their communities. Linking self-restraint and consumer-driven change to an ideal American way of affecting

cinematic moral boundaries, the focus of those associated with the Payne Fund Studies and

the Motion Picture Research Council, resonates with the work of the organization

discussed in the next chapter. There, I will discuss the work of an umbrella organization

called the Film Estimate Board of National Organizations, and draw connections between

the responsibilizing of viewership, the benefits of moral ambiguity, and the localizing of

moral repercussion articulated most precisely in the work of Edgar Dale, and those who

carried this torch into the later half of the 20th century, as well as the 21st.

Chapter 5
Film classifiers and the transfer of cultural authority

5.1) Post-WWII developments in cultural authority and media morality

After the Second World War, the United States experienced a sea change in the legal grounds supporting legislative censorship of the movies. Many of the earliest critics had understood that motion picture censorship was a problem for the industry, and a problem for what they took to be a fledgling and misunderstood new democratic art form. One important early critic, and Harvard professor of philosophy and applied psychology, Hugo Münsterberg, argued that if "an enthusiasm for the noble and uplifting, a belief in the duty and discipline of the mind, a faith in ideals and eternal values" coincided with the world depicted on screen, censorship of [such a culture's] entertainment would be unnecessary.[175] Münsterberg was among the first to connect film aesthetics to popular taste, in sharp contrast to his contemporaries. "His criticism was a first step in the eventual recognition that cultural authority had begun to reside with the audience," wrote Haberski (2001: 27).

In this chapter I argue that identifying moral ambiguity, or multiple possible messages, in a film presented opportunities for building moral authority around the audience, and the parent in particular. FEBNO's reviews pointed out instances of possible cinematic filth to parent readers, and by highlighting the organization's own moments of categorical disagreement such instances became opportunities for parents to assert their own opinions, perspectives, and conclusions about a film's moral worth and meaning. This construction

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[175] Quoted in Haberski 2001, p28. Münsterberg penned these thoughts almost a century ago, in his 1916 monograph, *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study.*

of parental moral authority provides important undergirding for the later work of the

contemporary ratings organization, Common Sense Media, discussed in the following

chapter. The empirical materials discussed below also evidence echoes of the work of

Edgar Dale and other film appreciators, as discussed in the previous chapter, forming a line

of continuation between earlier schools of thought through the present day. After

discussing the historical context of FEBNO and the industry, as well as the creation of the

American teenage demographic, I will move into an analysis and discussion of FEBNO's

classification patterns. This will reveal points of contention among FEBNO classifiers,

located around questions of comedy and the appropriate amount of moral and interpretive

confusion the new teenage audience could be expected to handle. I will begin with a

discussion of the historical context of the Film Estimate Board of National Organizations

(FEBNO), followed by a description of my methods for analyzing the archival and textual

materials, before moving into a discussion of the quality of the two groupings of filmic

texts.

Embedded in the belief that movies, as a new art form, required a new form of criticism,

was a larger conversation about art and the masses, and the belief that movies could and

did defy the traditional limits of cultural authority. The development in the concept of the

audience, from a mass entity that needed protection to a cultural authority capable of

arriving at its own decisions, is an important element in the transition from censorship to

ratings in managing the morality of media content. This chapter also focuses on one

germane example of this transition, highlighting the work of film reviewers and raters about a decade before the industry officially altered its moral policing strategy.

The move by courts across the country to reconsider laws and their effects on individual liberties is also part of the larger shift in American society from an era of communitarian, Progressive Era ideals towards an embrace of the vaunted individual and his/her rights. Decades prior, the U.S. Supreme Court had defined cinema as an industry not subject to First Amendment protections in the case of Mutual v. Ohio. There, the court concluded an industry could be censored, but a means of expression could not. Movies were not considered a means of expression, but rather a means of profit. Once the courts began to narrow their definitions of terms readily employed by censors, such as immorality, these legal foundations began to crumble. Post-WWII, film was increasingly conceptualized as more than film – that is, as a collection of ideas, an argument for a way of living, or an example of a situation and behaviors in it, all of which could be located on a spectrum of orthodox to unorthodox. Through many different channels, means, and arguments, the legal censorship of cinema eventually acquired First Amendment protections and ceased being defined as a pure and simple business (Wittern-Keller 2008, 2013). This development is also critical, as it gave industry leaders the confidence to do away with regulatory approaches and embrace ratings techniques for monitoring media production.

The growing market for foreign and independent films gave many American filmmakers the confidence to take on more adult material, creating more friction between the new

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generation of filmmakers and their audiences, and the Catholic-hued limits of content

regulation, supported by the industry's handlers. The 1950s also bore witness to poking

and prodding by film critics, intellectuals, lawyers and other civil libertarians, who

continued to characterize censorship not as an ideal of democracy, as it had been

understood in the Progressive Era, but as a repressive symbol, similar to what American

audiences understood to be happening in Nazi Germany, or the Soviet Union. Linked to

these developments, a ratings system in Hollywood had already been germinating by the

time the industry made the switch in 1968. An overlooked aspect of this shift is the work

of hundreds of women movie reviewers under the guise of the Federal Estimate Board of

National Organizations (FEBNO). FEBNO's pamphlets are direct evidence of the

industry's first attempts to conceptualize multiple audiences for its products, implicating

multiple types of moral repercussion to be discerned by individual readers themselves. By

declaring what certain audiences such as children, or teenagers, were *not* to watch

something, FEBNO also created a viewer category that, by default, was responsible for

maintaining moral correctness: the parent, and reader of their monthly ratings pamphlet.

I take advantage of a unique feature of my archival material by comparing messy ratings,

where a film was labeled with multiple classifications, with unanimous reviews, or films

labeled with one age category. Instances of ratings disagreements provide an ideal site for a

closer examination of ambiguity and assessments of filmic morality, and in particular,

comedic genres, often loaded with multiple interpretive possibilities, were the most

difficult for FEBNO classifiers to unanimously rate. Ambiguous, or unresolved comedic

films tended to deliver two competing moral messages simultaneously, creating disagreement about how much moral repercussion could be handled by the nascent audience demographic, and how responsible one might anticipate parents to be. The sociological attention I pay to the narrative qualities of films reveals the structure of narrative morality, moral authority, and the responsibilization of certain audiences over others, providing an important link between regulatory and ratings techniques of moral content control.

5.2) Audiences and trends in 1950s American cinema

"Grouped together, teenagers became a group," cultural historian Thomas Doherty wrote of the country's first teenagers (2002: 36). Cultural historians locate America's first teenagers with the generation born *during* WWII, the front tip of the Baby Boomers.[176] By the mid-1950s these original teenagers became the apple of many advertisers' eye. Some estimated the teenage market to be worth around $10 billion: "[T]he American teen-agers have emerged as a big-time consumer in the U.S. economy. They are multiplying in numbers. They spend more and have more spent on them. And they have minds of their own about what they want."[177] Just what those minds would decide to see at the movies was becoming an issue for parents, as teenagers increasingly headed to new multiplexes *alone*. I argue the Film Estimate Board of National Organization's classificatory disagreements around "mature young adult" audiences was linked to such shifts, bearing evidence on where a 'neutral' mature young adult's comedic boundaries were drawn, and

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[176] This discussion remains indebted to Doherty's engaging monograph *Teenagers and Teenpics* (2002).

[177] *Life*, 'A new $10-Billion Power: The U.S. Teen-Age Consumer,' August 31, 1959, p78.

where they were contested. This reveals a murky territory of moral repercussion, as it was unclear how the new audience demographic would perceive films and their moral messages, and how these audiences would be influenced and affected by such cinematic exposure as a result. The murkiness of moral repercussion complicated the realm of responsibility – if it was unclear how a new audience would understand a type, set, or group of films, whose responsibility was it to enable audiences to consume appropriately, or block them from inappropriate consumption?

Garnering their first bit of public attention in 1933, twelve women's organizations banded together to rate and review released pictures for the parent. These organizations formed a coalition, the Film Estimate Board (later adding, of National Organizations; FEBNO from hereon), stating their primary purpose as being, "to give objective information of a film's content and treatment, so that the reader [might] . . . exercise his responsibility in guiding the movie-going of his children."[178] The *New York Times* wrote of FEBNO's monthly publication, "it is believed [the *Joint Estimates of Current Entertainment Films,* later the *Green Sheet*] soon will become an important factor in influencing film showings in local theatres and in guiding the tastes of children."[179] Decades later an advertisement placed in a industry trade publication announced, "Improve your patronage and goodwill, and put the *Green Sheet* to work for your theatre in your community!"[180] By this point in 1964,

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[178] *Variety*, January 10, 1933, p1.

[179] The *New York Times*, 'Selecting the Family Film,' February 16, 1936, pX9.

[180] *Boxoffice*, April 20, 1964, p9.

FEBNO's subscription base had doubled from 32,000 to 60,000 copies, and included around 900 daily newspapers, 14,000 motion picture exhibitors, and 13,000 branch libraries.[181]

The umbrella organization of FEBNO and its publication, the *Green Sheet*, can be interpreted as progenitors of the Hollywood trade association, known as the Motion Picture Association of America's (MPAA), contemporary content control office, the Classification and Ratings Administration, though most film historians overlook their role in the industry's changes by the close of the 1960s (Saltz 2011). The MPAA had a fragile relationship with FEBNO, paying their overhead while maintaining an arm's length from the organization and their decisions in public. Each member organization selected a motion picture chairperson, who then put together a reviewing committee ranging from 10 to 50 members in their home organization. By 1964, FEBNO boasted between 200 and 250 reviewers among its member organizations and their preview committees, allowing for, "a wide range of tastes and objectivity of judgment."[182] The initial idea behind publishing their reviews was to circulate them to churches, schools, and other civic organizations, where parents of movie-going children could easily access them. As their circulation began to expand in kind, to include schools, theater owners' associations, and reprinting in local newspapers, FEBNO changed their pamphlet's title to the *Green Sheet* and adopted a more standardized pamphlet layout. Unlike the Production Code's aim to keep movies in line not allow them to, "lower the moral standards of those who see [them]," the *Green Sheet*

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[181] *Variety*, "Double 'Green Sheet' Circulation; Hope to Curb Classification Trend," March 4, 1964, p20.

[182] *Boxoffice*, "Green Sheet Goes National in New Distribution Plan," March 9, 1964, p4.

presented a counterpoint to the medium and its perceived effects and powers.[183] Rather

than drawing a connection between morally indecent films and the degradation of culture

and society, FEBNO's estimates correlated poor taste in subject matter with meager

aesthetic quality, and vice versa, and developed a mode of apprehending film and its

meaning that via a discourse of cinematic celebration.

Indeed, the *Joint Estimates* often linked moral complaints to the aesthetic accomplishments

of a movie, rather than opposing the two, a tendency pointed out by some as a

characteristic shortcoming of Catholic criticism.[184] FEBNO was able to praise movies that

were not 100% sanitized, and while "mature audience only" films were rarely given the

honor of being "Best of the Month," their unique aesthetic qualities were still commended.

It is worth mentioning that other groups had been classifying movies for many years, as had

other countries such as Britain, France, and Italy. Other organizations in the United States

such as the National Board of Review and *Boxoffice* also reviewed and classified films, while

the Catholic Legion of Decency classified and condemned movies. Yet none of these

organizations had so much diversity among its members, nor had any of them allowed

room for disagreement in their reporting style.[185] This made the *Green Sheet* (and the *Joint*

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[183] The Production Code has been printed in various books on film history. One excellent discussion can be found in Jowett (1976). In particular, see p240-43, and p468-72.

[184] See Kerr (1957) for a lengthy discussion of this criticism. Walter Kerr was a Pulitzer Prize winning Catholic theater critic, and devoted the subject of an address at St. Louis University to this topic.

[185] By the 1960s member organizations were: the American Jewish Committee, the Protestant Motion Picture Council, the National Congress of Parents and Teachers, the Daughters of the American Revolution, the General Federation of Women's Clubs, the National Council of Women of the U.S.A., the Schools Motion Picture Committee, the National Federation of Music Clubs, the Federation of Motion Picture Councils, and American Library Association; the American Association of University Women and the Children's Film

Estimates) unique among classifiers. One of the noteworthy features of the *Joint Estimates/Green Sheet* was that member organizations disagreements over the proper classification for a film were published in the pamphlet. While most films had one rating attached to it, some titles had multiple ratings. Their written justifications and disagreements provide a starting point for an investigation into imagined audiences and the trust estimates had in their readers' ability and aptitude to make the right choices for themselves. It is through these classification disagreements that I will evaluate cinematic narratives and argue that dissonance in meaning and ambiguity in a film's classification became a resource in the overall trend toward responsibilizing the parent with their own unique cultural and moral authority.

FEBNO reviewers adopted a film appreciation approach to cinema that relied on both reviews of films, formulated by their own reading and interpretation of a film, as well as open-ended questions. These questions bear resemblance to the questions posed by Edgar Dale and his educational manual on film appreciation for the young viewer. They were detailed, picture-specific questions, attached to the end of the classification pamphlet. Under the title, "Educational Consultants on Entertainment Films," this section blended the educational value, or social value in Dale's terms (see chapter 4), with the concept of the entertainment film. Taking the film *Henry V* (1958) as an example, FEBNO educational consultants organized their overview of the film into five parts: "Historic Background," "*Henry V* as a Movie," "Art and Artistry in the Production," "Music," and "Questions for Discussion," and even included a short bibliography for further reading.

Library Committee left by 1960 (Saltz, 2011).

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The section on the historic background of the film described the context of Shakespeare's 16th century play about the 15th century English king. FEBNO's opinions on a film and its source material were visible here, as well as their opinions on the particular strengths of cinema as a medium. Commenting on the adaptation of the play to the screen, they cited a passage uttered in the play by the chorus, and utilized this as a bridge between the stage and the screen:

> "As the actor who speaks the lines of the chorus continues evoking the image of King Henry's invasion fleet crossing the Channel, there is a long, slow, almost imperceptible dissolve through which the scene of the fleet is superimposed over the Chorus on the stage of the Globe. From this point on, the drama of *Henry V* is presented in the conventions of the modern screen. The motion picture camera provides the images that Shakespeare, through his Chorus, sought to stimulate."[186]

Directing the reader to a set of questions on the film, FEBNO suggested entertainment and educational points of discussion. Questions such as, "Why were the actors' costumes of Shakespeare's time so lavish while the scenery was so bare?" or, "Why would the play *Henry V* be popular with the Shakespeare audience?" suggested the viewer of the film ask further questions of the context of the source material before and after viewing it. Other questions pointed to the importance of understanding the historical context of the content depicted in the film. "Why did the English beat the French at Agincourt? What kind of warfare was employed at the time?" FEBNO's educational consultants asked.[187] In this way, FEBNO blended entertainment and educational values for the cinema.

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[186] *Joint Estimates of Current Entertainment Films*, March 1, 1958 (the pamphlet does not have page numbers).

[187] Ibid.

Cinema scholars agree that between 1946 and 1961 the American film industry changed

dramatically as a result of at least two major factors: the exponential boom of television,

and the 1948 U.S. Supreme Court decision, known as *The Paramount Decision*, whereby the

Court ruled against the industry and its oligarchic, vertical arrangement of studios and

theaters.[188] Box office revenue greatly declined from $1.7 billion to $955 million.[189] There

were subsequent readjustments among studios and their conceived audience segmentation

schemes, as studios scrambled to attract any audience they could coax away from the

glowing television sets in their living rooms. Audience research commissioned by the

Motion Picture Association of America (or MPAA, the industry's main trade association)

and other research organizations found that younger audiences still preferred to see movies

in theaters rather than at home. Studios concluded those young audiences, or the

emerging American teenager, were the most economically promising audience toward

which they should produce and market their pictures (Jowett, 1976).

The late 1950s was also a time of withering legal standing for official state or municipal

cinema censorship, while film classification and ratings schemas continued to operate. The

MPAA continued to maintain a tenuous relationship with their pseudo-official classifiers

during these years. Publicly they argued against the use of FEBNO ratings, or any other

classification system, as a means of combating official cinema censorship. Yet by the late

1960s the trade organization abolished its internal production code, and took over the role

of rating films for age-appropriateness itself. FEBNO ratings are thus more accurately

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[188] *United States v. Paramount Pictures, Inc. et al* (1948).

[189] See Wyatt (1994) or Lewis (2000) for more discussion on how these figures were derived.

understood as a flexible middle-ground between an uncritical acceptance of all cinematic fare, and the increasingly outdated notion of a one-size-fits-all approach to film production, a view harbored in previous years by some cinema censors and studios alike. FEBNO's methods of reviewing films also allowed for inter-organizational discord over a film's location in their age-based classification scheme, and articulated uncertainty over the moral repercussions of a film. This was a realistic strategy for maintaining group participation in the endeavor of classifying Hollywood products, and responsibilized readers to follow the organization whose opinions they valued the most as a result. Thus the reader was brought into the decision-making fold, turning perceived textual ambiguity into a resource for parental cultural authority.

These articulations of responsibility bore similarities to the film appreciation methods of the 1930s, discussed in the previous chapter (though the technique employed here was closer to the work of Frederic Thrasher than Edgar Dale). FEBNO reviewers laid out a series of paths to guide readers to arrive at interpretations of moral meaning in film, allowing individuals to pick and choose among the organizations and their opinions on a film. The reader (or reader-viewer) was responsibilized to identify themselves, their tastes, and their expectations for cinema with a specific organization and follow their lead. This approach did not assume that readers should or could arrive at the correct opinions on a film solely on their own. This overlaps with the approach to meaning making and the practices of moral boundary drawing presented in the work of Common Sense Media, the empirical site of the following chapter. While Common Sense Media blends the

approaches of FEBNO and Edgar Dale, granting more responsibility to viewers through sets of open-ended questions, they also attach such questions to their own reviews and opinions on a film or other media object. This creates a tension between the cultural authority of the parent and the cultural authority of the advocacy organization, a tension which will be discussed in more detail in the following chapter.

In some ways, the sharp declines in box office that plagued the industry, associated with the gains in post-WWII television viewership, were giving industry leaders much to worry about. Yet the increase in attendance by the nation's youth was something of a relief. But securing the moral permissibility of their attendance required more work than simply capturing their attention and securing their dollars. While FEBNO's ratings reveal an uptick in adult-oriented or adult-approved content, a clash over cultural authority in defining where the mature young adult audience stopped and the adult audience began was percolating.

5.3) Finding the "average teenage spectator"

Bourdieu (1993) notes that large-scale production and its seemingly neutral products are the result of social and economic production conditions. He elaborates on this in a footnote:

> "Where common and semi-scholarly discourse sees a homogenous message producing a homogenized public ('massification'), it is necessary to see an undifferentiated message produced *for* a socially undifferentiated public at the cost of a methodical self-censorship leading to the abolition of all signs and factors of differentiation. To the most amorphous messages (e.g. large-circulation daily and weekly newspapers) there corresponds the most socially amorphous public."[190]

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[190] Bourdieu 1993, footnote 22, p292 (emphasis in original).

For Bourdieu, filmic texts that appear to be for the masses are made to appear as such, an achievement of careful self-censorship. As Hollywood began to multiply audience categories, producers began producing motion pictures specifically aimed at teenagers. Classifiers disagreed over where the socially neutral product might be located, or how it might be limited. Locating the moral boundaries for a nascent audience demographic, and identifying cultural authority in defining these boundaries was part of FEBNO's struggle to discern this high, middle ground for the new audience of teenagers. How were such publics and their moral boundaries constructed, Bourdieu asked (1993: 125)? How were boundaries for the cinematic content deemed appropriate for them built, and where were the lines drawn? While this dissertation exemplifies the multiple manners and techniques through which cultural intermediaries achieve the outcome of directing media circulation, this chapter provides evidence for a particular sort of responsibilized adult, attached to the newly recognized and contentious teenage audience demographic. Parents were assigned the capability of knowing their own preferences and boundaries, separating themselves from their children, and enforcing such boundaries on their children's viewing patterns.

Noting that middle-brow art production attempts to systematically eschew all potentially troublesome content, Bourdieu wrote, "This means that the production of goods, even when they are aimed at a specific statistical category (the young, women, football fans, stamp collectors, etc.), must represent a kind of highest social denominator" (1993: 126). In the give and take between cultural producers and controllers of the means of

production, producers "come to use their specific competencies to guarantee a wide variety of cultural interests while simultaneously reactivating the self-censorship engendered by the vast industrial and bureaucratic organizations of cultural production through invocation of the 'average spectator' (ibid.)." But who was the average spectator in an emerging audience segment, and how could parents be properly responsibilized to recognize which products would fit the bill for their own teenage cinemagoer?

Where Bourdieusian approaches to film stress the field over the products, the products themselves also help scholars understand the field, especially if we seek to understand where the moral boundaries and repercussions for the average spectator were, and what texture they take on through the relevant cinematic narrative. Though Bourdieu was concerned with the context surrounding cultural objects and artworks, the development of a highest common denominator does not come about solely by way of a maker's intentions – it is shaped by other evaluative and consecrating agents along the way. In the case of cinema, America's emerging teenage audiences were constricted and defined partly by American clubwomen at FEBNO and their classifying decisions. The terms and strategies of approval, endorsement, and segmentation are all relevant in examining how audiences, moral responsibility, and cultural authority are constructed in criticism. Along these lines, sociologist Herb Gans argued the image of the audience is key to understanding how and why objects, reviewers, papers, and outlet channels are all aligned as such. "What is offered as criticism of the content is really in part ... a value statement about the proper audience to be sought" (1957: 322). Following this lead, I methodologically connect the

texts and types of stories evaluated to the critical judgments and value statements made about them, while training a spotlight on the emerging teenage spectator and the difficulty in establishing what their comedic average was.

Below I will examine how FEBNO reviewers reviewed and classified films, inverting this conventional approach to cultural objects from the outset. As the sociologist of art David Inglis (2005) argues, sociologists of art and film have been stalled by the now commonsense notion that art is merely a label applied to objects by specific organizations, institutions, or positions of people, that all art and culture is relative, and that power and culture are necessarily suffused with one another. By incorporating filmic texts into my analysis of how moral boundaries and cultural authority are sorted out and classified, I do not intend to dismiss the basic tenets sociologists of art have built around the seminal production of culture perspective(s). Rather, in this case I argue such texts form a meaningful chunk of empirical material for excavating how the moral boundaries and repercussions for the first American teenager's comedic film exposure were articulated. Before addressing the empirical questions of repercussion, responsibility, and authority, I will outline the methods employed here, focusing the discussion on archival and textual methods.

5.4) Interpreting narratives with archival and textual methods

By using both archival and filmic/textual analysis, I evaluated FEBNO pamphlets, narrowing my textual focus to those genres and age categories that were most contested. In this section I will discuss why and how I identify comedy as the most contentious genre,

and the methods employed for linking classification decisions to filmic texts and narratives. Through archival analysis, I constructed a sample of films for the filmic analysis of this research. I will discuss the archival component of this study before highlighting my approach to viewing the content closely. Rothenberg (2014) notes the hyper-sociality of artistic and cultural artifacts, arguing that understanding cultural objects as such allows for deeper understandings of society. I extend this to include movies. By comparing the narrative qualities of those movies with multiple classifications to those with a unanimous age classification, this research speaks to deeper understandings of the shifting structure of cultural authority in media consumption.

Archival Methods

The archival aspect of this study is limited to the years 1958-1965, as this time period encapsulated the arrival en masse of the American teen to their local multiplex. FEBNO's classification decisions are an ideal site for examining the middle ground between the censorship of the past, and the adopted ratings strategy of the American film industry (adopted in 1968). FEBNO included a mature young adult, or mature young audience, category in its decisions, which allows this study to highlight the demographic shift and rising phenomenon of American teenager-ness. And most important, FEBNO classifiers were given room to disagree on a film's categorization, resulting in titles with more than one categorical label.[191] Locating a continuous bulk of FEBNO decisions between 1958-1965, I documented all instances of titles with competing age-classifications. I paid

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[191] The most contested titles were labeled with four different categories, spanning the range of child audience to adults only.

particular attention to the genre and age categories involved in these instances of classification struggle, noting how many organizations argued for which specific categories for a title. This analysis (see tables 1-3 below) evidences that comedies were the most contentious or ambiguous genre of film, and that the most tenuous line was between mature young adults and adult audiences.

By building a list of titles that had categorical disagreement attached to them, the total number of titles in all issues, n=1,111, was brought down to 85. Taken as a whole, these categorical disagreements suggest FEBNO classifiers accepted movies as objects that were malleable; there was room for shades of gray. This flexibility allowed audiences the ability to navigate the *Joint Estimates* with a sense of authenticity, a departure from other forms of content control wherein audiences had little agency to make personalized decisions about their movie-going habits.

Of the 85 contentious titles, 70 involved either a majority or minority rating of "mature young adult" (table 1). The mature young adult emerges as the category most often involved in a contested classification decision. "Adult" audiences being contended 56% of the time, "young people" 42% of the time, and the "family" category 19% of the time. (It is worth bearing in mind that not all comedies were contentious, and comedies were not only contentious for mature young audiences.) Of these same 85 titles where classification was contested, 33 titles involved titles described as comedic, around 40% of the time (table 2). 70 contentious titles where the majority of members labeled a film "mature young

adult" were divided between this label and the "adult" label. And among these, comedies

were being discussed 40% of the time, or in eighteen cases.

Audience Category	Number of disagreements involving category X:	Percent*
ADULT	48	56%
MATURE YOUNG ADULT	70	82%
YOUNG ADULT	36	42%
CHILD AND FAMILY	16	19%
		N = 85

*Percentages do not equal 100 because each disagreed film had, by definition, at least two categories attached to it.

Table 1) Frequency of Contended Categories among FEBNO classification decisions, 1958-1966

Genre	Frequency
Drama	30
Comedy	32
Thriller	8
Western / Action	11
Misc. (gangster, sci-fi, children's film, musical)	4
	N = 85

Table 2) Genre and Frequency of Classificatory Disagreement among FEBNO classification decisions, 1958-1966

The genre of a film was defined according to FEBNO reviews, and double-checked against

IMDB.com classifications; in every instance these sources matched up.[192] Comedies were

problematic for other audience groups as well, but "mature young audience" boundaries

were most tenuous around comedies (table 3). For example, in 1958, 32 comedies were

approved for audiences; only 4 were unanimously classified as being appropriate for

"mature young audiences." Of all the "mature young adult" titles from 1958, only four of

them were comedies. Narrowing in on the question of teenage exposure to comedy I turn

my attention to three contentious "mature young adult" comedies and compare them to

three unanimously defined "mature young adult comedies," highlighting humor,

ambiguity, and layers of meaning in each filmic text.

Genre	Frequency
Comedy	29
Drama	26
Thriller / Sci-fi / Action	11
Western	4
	N = 70

Table 3) Disagreements Involving the Mature Young Audience Category by Genre among FEBNO classification decisions, 1958-1966

Taking these results as a springboard for deeper research, I then moved into a textual

analysis of a set of films with an eye toward their narrative patterns, ambiguity in the text,

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[192] Problems were presented by titles with two genres attached to them, for example a comedic Western. Here I code films based on the genre cited more often in the FEBNO review.

and the discourse through which FEBNO turned such ambiguity into a resource for the development of parental authority.

Textual Methods

Humor can be dangerous, relied on to sweeten otherwise sensitive subjects and in some cases render them digestible. Shifting the focus to cinematic texts, I ask of each film what are its parts, and how are they arranged to generate humorous situations? Based on the cleavages that were exposed during the archival research phase, I built a small sample of films for analysis and limited my focus to both unanimous and contentious mature young adult comedies from a single year, 1958, as the late 1950s marked the beginning of the Baby Boomer's to the American marketplace. In this way, a response to the question of whether there are differences in the narrative patterns of films with one category or multiple categories becomes tenable. Also, by holding the year constant, shifting contextual elements such as slight changes in FEBNO's membership, new developments in the industry's production trends, or other trends in the burgeoning youth culture of the time are reduced. By comparing three titles that were unanimously classified as mature young adult comedies with three titles that had multiple categories, I argue films with obvious moral messages that were uncontested by humor were more likely to be unanimously classified as mature young adult. On the other hand, moral ambiguity arose when a narrative's resolution was thrown into question by the film's own comedic element(s). To help guide these interpretations I created a set of open-ended questions that were addressed while viewing each film: What actions, characters or situations drive

the humor? What is the moral stance of the narrative? And is the humor harmonious with the film's moral orientation, or is it left ambiguous?

These questions were posed to the sample of six films, and guided a close viewing of each film. Notes were taken on the films, both while viewing as well as afterwards. In describing a film's narrative layout these questions kept the discussion focused and comparable. Conclusions were reached after a film was viewed, by re-reading my notes on the film and its comedic sense and sensibility, returning to specific moments in the filmic text for clarity, and editing these notes into more complete and coherent thoughts on the structure of narrative comedy and moral messages. While this phase of the research relies on interpretation on the part of the researcher, my interpretations remain anchored by these questions. Furthermore, the conclusions are tied to clearly observable elements of the films. In this sense the method and my findings are replicable.[193]

Comedic subgenres

Shifting the focus to the textual quality of the films requires sensitivity to the subgenres of comedy. The most pertinent comedic subgenres are sophisticated, sentimental and screwball comedies. I will briefly outline each subgenre before moving into a discussion of the cinematic narratives. Sophisticated comedies are characterized by illicit sexual relations, witty quips, and cynicism, the characters often devoted to sex and money. While

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[193] The comedies selected here were either unanimously labeled mature young adult fare, or were precariously positioned between adult and mature young adult audiences. The films selected here were also viewable, either on DVD, VHS, or via a digital streaming service. This approach and method could be applied to another set of films located in another genre or across genres, to another age category, or to another national or transnational film context.

espousing heady commentary on contemporary society, the institution of marriage was often lampooned. The view that such comedies are immoral stems from these genre conventions (Hirst, 1979). Here humor is generated by the incongruity between proper, upper class characters that the viewer assumes knows what proper behavior is, yet whose actions defy or reject such expectations. Though the conclusion of a sophisticated comedy may feature a re/united couple, most create comedic doubt around the compatibility of the couple and marriage as an institution (Greene, 2011).

Unlike sophisticated comedies, sentimental comedies detail the lives of average middle- or upper-middle class heterosexual couples attempting some form of upward mobility. Such films often appeal to the heart of the spectator, hence the term sentimental, and are morally resolved to fit the normative climate by the film's close. (For example, female characters of the 1950s that attempted to maintain professional careers tossed these ambitions aside and resume their expected role as head of hearth and home by the film's end.) Comedic situations are provided by the incongruence of a woman's professional ambitions and the assumed role for women, resolved in common-sense manners. And screwball or slapstick comedies usually involve strong female characters, mistaken identities, challenged masculinities, quick repartee, and "screwy" behavior. Farcical situations and escapist plots, wherein class differences between characters are exemplified, and mistaken identities involved in attempts to pass for a higher class, are also associated with the genre. Here the humor stems from the ridiculous treatment of otherwise serious concepts, like class, gender, or social status. Though these comedic couples are happily

married, or re-married by the end of the film, larger societal commentary is often left unresolved.

These genre characteristics will be useful in evaluating patterns in FEBNO's classification decisions. All of the unanimously classified films were sentimental, romantic comedies – though it is not the case that all sentimental or romantic comedies were automatically labeled mature young adult fare (as *Teacher's Pet* will evidence). The other titles that were precariously labeled include a slapstick musical comedy and a sophisticated comedy. Here I would like to refine my claim: films that were difficult to categorize did not necessarily present morally ambiguous messages, but *the way they employed humor created ambiguity around the overarching moral message.* I operationalize narrative ambiguity by noting where two different moral messages occurred simultaneously, where one level of moral meaning did not support the moral meaning of another. These definitions shed light on how a set of narratives and symbolic boundaries were translated into questions for developing parental cultural authority and responsibility.

5.5) Comedy and ambiguity

Teenagers were a new, highly desirable, demographic for Hollywood fare. I evaluate FEBNO reviews as a way to demarcate certain films that were appropriate for this emerging audience group. In discussing six comedies, three that were difficult to classify and three that were unanimously labeled mature young adult, I will demonstrate that contentious films presented ambiguous morals across levels of meaning while unanimously classified

films presented more harmonious narratives. Contentious films blended both morally appropriate and inappropriate messages, communicating ambiguity and construing cinematic filth through humorous characters and situations. Unanimously classified films did not rely on such forms of cinematic filth in order to be read as humorous, and were less ambiguous in their meaning, making their moral repercussions easier to discern and assign to a specific age-based audience over another. I will first discuss mature young adult comedies that were unanimously understood as such, and follow this with a discussion of the contentious titles and their specific forms of cinematic filth.

"Mature young adult" comedies

The unanimously labeled "mature young adult" comedies viewed here are dominated by the sentimental or romantic comedy genre. While all three of these unanimously classified films involved then-controversial topics, such as teenage marriage, premarital sex, and age discrepancies in romantic relations, each narrative was resolved in a way that endorsed an appropriate or responsible approach to such situations. *Going Steady* centered on a teenage couple that elopes, and the subsequent difficulty the girl's parents have in grasping their daughter's situation. *Onionhead* focused on a young Coast Guard's search for affection and love, despite his claims otherwise. And *But Not For Me* revolved around an aging theater producer, who in dealing with his much-younger secretary's unwarranted affection for him, manages to save his career and re-marry his ex-wife (who is safely in his age cohort). In discussing each title I build the argument that these films feature narrative resolves that tie all the loose ends together, as opposed to leaving room for alternative readings.

Going Steady derived most of its humor from the interactions of the young son-in-law,

Calvin Potter, and his stodgy father-in-law, Gordon Turner. Gordon intensely dislikes

Calvin, opining often as such, the type of father who would never like any of the young

men his daughter, Julie Ann, brought home. Gordon generates most of the humor as he

sneers and snarls about Calvin, intimidating him into instances physical goofiness, as he

bumps into lamps and doors and doorjambs. In fact, the adults generated the bulk of the

comedy, with tension building around the headstrong youth who were not looking to their

parents for much more than a roof over their heads, much to their parents' chagrin.

FEBNO took issue with the relationship between adults and teenagers, and wrote:

> "Two high school seniors marry during a basketball weekend away from home and do not disclose
> their secret until the girl becomes pregnant. They keep going to school, envied by all their friends,
> while the girl's father tries to arrange some pattern of living which will let his son-in-law meet the
> responsibilities he has taken on so thoughtlessly. Everything is made easy for the two pampered
> youngsters, though relationship with their elders is crowded with the gripes always found in teenage
> comedies. The adults … are all comically unequal to the situation … Eventually, independence and
> maturity begin to appear. The serious question of whether or not young people should 'go steady' is
> treated lightly, with a disregard of the difficulties youngsters face in growing up […]"[194]

Positioning Gordon as the film's protagonist, the moral nature of the imaginative

engagement a spectator might have with him was one of sympathy as he watched his

daughter bungle her life. Yet the spectator may have also found his displeasure

unfounded, as it is made clear that Calvin is sincere in his affections for Julie Ann and vice

versa. The relationship the viewer has with the young couple is decidedly straightforward

in this regard. Their major secret, that they have eloped, is shared with the audience.

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[194] *Joint Estimates of Current Entertainment Films*, 'Going Steady,' March 1, 1958. The pamphlets were
unnumbered.

Their marriage is treated with little fuss by the teenage couple, and the pregnancy by no fuss on Julie Ann's part and bemused excitement by Calvin. Indeed it was the adults that made all the fuss around them, while the teenagers maintained a mix of casualness and cool excitement.

One reading of the moral of this film is that young couples striking out on their own should define themselves independent of their families, and not rely on them for homes and work. They should be responsible for their own success. Another reading is that parents do not always know what's best for their children, even if they have their best intentions at heart. The reactions prescribed by the film are very clear. Though the couple is young and still in school, they are in love, intending to become independent eventually. And in the end they in fact do, as Calvin secures a job from a successful insurance man at the end of the film. The prescribed reaction to these developments is one of approval and belief that the couple will prosper, Calvin providing for his family and Julie Ann learning how to cook and be a good wife, as well as a devoted mother. The humor, stemming from the father's grumpy outlook on the young couple and their prospects, was resolved by this ending. There was no confusion around the humor, and no confusion about where the couple would be in five or ten years down the road. Gordon eventually comes around to the young couple, and so too would the viewer.

Similarly unambiguous, *Onionhead* starred Andy Griffith as Al Wood, a young college student working his way through college who drops out in a huff over his girlfriend's

unwillingness to "commit." While in the beginning of the film this commitment is

depicted as pre-marital sex, by the end of the film the couple wed without going any further

than kissing. FEBNO critiqued:

> "On its long rambling way, this yarn of life in the Coast Guard veers from custard-throwing slapstick
> to war action with an enemy submarine to Andy Griffith's involvement with an amorous café
> hanger-on, whose sex-preoccupation is presented as a psychological disturbance. Andy (Onionhead)
> enlists in the Coast Guard and is made a cook's mate, on the basis of his experience as a waiter in
> college. His difficulties with a corrupt commissary officer and the chief cook at sea, and with his
> pal's straying wife in his bars-and-blondes existence ashore, make up the greater part of the
> somewhat seamy comedy [...]"[195]

Most of the humor is delivered from Al's fascination with women, despite his constant

insistence that he has sworn women off and that they are no good. This tension between

his words and his actions is comedic in many instances. In one sequence Al decides

whether to join the U.S. Coast Guard or the Marine Corps, whose recruiting offices are

right next to each other. After peering into both offices, he stands in a hallway in between

them and produces a coin from his pocket, intending to flip it as a manner of resolving the

dilemma. But as he flips it a woman walks by in a form fitting dress and distracts him, the

coin dropping to the floor and rolling off into the Coast Guard's offices. Al watches the

woman's figure recede down the hallway and finally comes to, following after his coin into

the office, whereupon an uninterested Coast Guard officer hands him a form. Al shrugs

his shoulders, and signs up for the Coast Guard as a result. There are many other

instances of humor generated by men and their fascination with women and subsequent

attempts to solicit their attention, be it Al's peeping tom college roommate who watches

with awe as the blond across the way washes her hair, another Coast Guard shipmate who

is continually slapped by women at bars as he pinches their bottoms, or a pair of overly

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[195] Ibid., 'Onionhead,' November 1, 1958.

eager boys who blurt out at the same time, "I just got into town," as they vied for the attention of a single woman at a bar table.

There are also elements of slapstick comedy in the film, notably in two scenes. In the first, Al takes a stab at baking cinnamon buns. When his hands became sticky with dough he decided to add the entire box of yeast to the buns, prompting the dough to rise up out of the oven and take over the kitchen, to the cackles of his fellow cooks. In a later scene, a barroom full of U.S. Coast Guards celebrating a wedding retaliate against two army soldiers who poked fun at their unit, with much wedding cake bandied about the bar as a result. It is important to point out that the mere presence of slapstick elements did not garner a film an adult rating; it mattered *how* the slapstick scenes were played out and with what tone. In *Onionhead,* the scenes are used to provoke laughter and sympathy towards Al, who was unaware of what so much yeast will do to dough, relying on gendered expectations for the character. This differs from the case of *Damn Yankees* (discussed below), as the musical's famous slapstick dance routine was imbued with a highly sexualized tone.

In other words, there was little ambiguity in the immediate meaning of the humor; in laughing, one tacitly supported Al's attempts to secure female attention, or his pal's attempts to do likewise. The few physical comedy numbers were sympathetic and stereotypically masculine, relying on a lack of culinary knowledge, or a quick resort to violence when one's honor is insulted. Like *Going Steady,* the humor is digestible, with no

obvious societal morals being challenged, no actual criticism being leveraged against the

U.S. Coast Guard, eloping teens, or the endeavor of militarized border protection.

But Not For Me is a romantic comedy starring Clark Gable and Carroll Baker that features

the happy ending perhaps par excellence. Gable's character, Russ Ward, is established as a

busy theatrical producer with a quick and dry sense of humor, who has a lot of bark but no

real bite. FEBNO reviewers were all in accord when they wrote:

> "The infatuation of his pretty secretary does two vitally important things for theatrical producer
> Clark Gable: it assures him that he is as young and magnetic as ever and it gives him an idea for a
> new play in which the girl can star – a May-November romance where May makes most of the
> advances. Both play and romance get along famously until the producer's charming ex-wife Lili
> Palmer resorts to machinations that every woman knows and breaks up the affair before either her
> former husband or the girl can get hurt."[196]

FEBNO pointed out to the reader/viewer that before anything became too dicey, one

sensible character broke things up, noting in another sense that the moral repercussion for

viewing the film was not so harmful. Speaking on the phone with his secretary in the

opening scene, Russ is informed his ex-wife (the sensible character mentioned here),

Kathryn, has just walked into the office looking for him. "What should I do with her?" his

secretary, Ellie, asks. "Do with her? Put her in the conference room and give her a bundle

of my old check stubs to read!" Russ replies, before hanging up to answer another ringing

telephone. A few scenes later, in the conference room, Kathryn presents him with a gift,

declaring it is for the "fourth anniversary of our mutual divorce." Russ takes the box

wearily and asks, unwrapping, "What time does it go off?" But the quip is met with a sweet

and playful humor by Kathryn, who replies, snapping her finger, "I never thought of

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[196] *The Green Sheet*, 'But Not For Me,' October 1959.

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that!" Russ admires the gift for a moment, a musical cigarette holder playing the couple's eponymous 'song,' "But Not For Me," before closing the box and saying, "You're all heart gathering. Last year you sent me a large water bottle that snored, the year before that you published my love letters in *Look* magazine. You know, I might just marry you again to stop all this nonsense!" Giggling, Kathryn responds, "Oh - my analyst wouldn't hear of it!" Analyst or not, the couple decides to remarry by the end of the film, reinforcing the socially acceptable notion of the couple along the lines of a November-November romance, as opposed to a May-November romance.

The plot revolves around a play Russ is desperately trying to produce, in order to prove he is not passé. But his playwright, Mack, has fallen back into his alcoholic habits and is unable to complete the script, which tells the story of a man of 60 who falls in love with a 20 year-old woman. The two discuss the relationship between the man and the woman, Russ insisting it's too insidious for audiences to handle. "An old man pawing at a young woman," he exclaims with disgust. Mack convinces him in turn that they are both washed up has-beens, and that they should quit while they can. Deciding Mack might be right, Russ informs his secretary to cancel his affairs and fire the staff, causing her to burst into a confession of love for him. Russ's eyes pop, for this is the answer to his quandary. If it's the older man who chases the woman the play does not work, but if it's the other way around, the action becomes "pure." The ensuing discussions between Mack and Russ, and the reversal of the romantic action taken by the characters, rendered the play (and the film)

less at odds with societal expectations, even showing signs of towing to it instead of flaunting it.

These films presented no difficulties for FEBNO classifiers. Despite their narrative differences, all three of the discussed films feature humor that bolsters, rather than detracts from, a digestible resolution to their narratives. In this way the films remained morally acceptable rather than becoming morally questionable. Identifying the moral repercussions associated with watching such films, and spotting which elements of the film were responsible for such repercussions, was not a loaded exercise for FEBNO reviewers, as they were all of a mind on what moral repercussions these specific films presented and whether or not such repercussions could be affectively handled by teenage audiences. Turning now to comedies that were subject to debate, I will evidence how narrative resolvability can also be hampered by comedy, resulting in nebulous moral repercussions and an opportunity for parent readers to establish their cultural authority in the media viewing practices of their children.

5.6) Comedy and classification struggles

Humor invites multiple interpretations of a film, and depending on the tone and nature of the humor, can cast a more or less favorable light on the overall moral soundness of a film. Here I will discuss three titles that incurred debates by FEBNO classifiers, resulting in a precarious classification with multiple labels. Some classifiers felt these titles were "mature young adult" appropriate, while others insisted on restricting the title to "adults only." *Gigi* flaunted adultery as little cause for serious concern, throwing marriage as an institution

into question despite the eponymous character's marriage at the film's end. *Damn Yankees* involved humor derived from nonverbal, screwy choreography that proved difficult to classify. And *Teacher's Pet* featured an extended drinking scene, and an appearance from Mamie Van Doren, which gave some estimates room for concern (though this film, a sentimental comedy, was also rated as appropriate for "young adults" by several classifiers). These films thus constitute cinematic filth, as their narratives blurred the boundaries between acceptable and unacceptable moral repercussion, and created discord among classifiers as to which audience was capable of discerning and interpreting such moral ambiguities for what they were.

Gigi is a sophisticated comedy whose quips are continuously lobbed at the bourgeoisie and other simpletons, those who marry and settle down without seeking "more" in life – that more being defined by a pair of retired courtesan sisters responsible for raising Gigi. FEBNO wrote:

> "A very beguiling musical has been made of Colette's tale of a young girl who, though trained under the highly sophisticated tutelage of her demi-mondaine aunt, entrances a notoriously blasé playboy into marriage by her natural, impish charm. A hand-picked cast, dazzling clothes, gaslit potted-palmy sets by Cecil Beaton, and a consistently happy score by Frederic Loewe and Alan Jay Lerner capture the elegance, froth and worldly values of early twentieth century Paris. Maurice Chevalier, at his most endearing, acts as a debonair master of ceremonies ... maintaining the delightful mannered gaiety that is the tone of the piece. Leslie Caron as Gigi makes a touching transformation from hoyden into polished young womanhood, and Louis Jourdan her bewildered boulevardier, manages to seem stuffy and be charming at the same time. Lively glimpses of the ... gathering places of Parisian high-life give the proper background to the sparkling adult fairy tale."[197]

On the one hand, the narrative can be interpreted as depicting the story of a young girl who bucks family tradition by deciding to marry, instead of engage in extramarital affairs

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[197] *Joint Estimates of Current Entertainment Films,* 'Gigi,' May 15, 1958.

with high profile men. Following family wishes and norms is not necessarily the best way

to live life, especially if those familial expectations and customs are contrary to mainstream

values. Exacerbating this subtle subversion is the comedic delivery of the narrative and its

morals. As a result, marriage and the expectation of fidelity are presented in the film in

ambiguous ways. On the one hand it forms the object of ridicule among the social elite,

embodied by the narrator Honore Lachaille and his playboy socialite nephew Gaston.

"Married?" Honore asks the audience in his introduction to the film. "What for!" Later,

during the well-known musical number between Gigi's grandmother, Madame Alvarez and

Honore, "I Remember It Well," Honore says, "I'll tell you about that blue villa, Mamita. I

was so much in love with you, I wanted to marry you. Yes, it's true. I was beginning to

think of marriage. Imagine, marriage, ME! Oh, no! I was really desperate! I had to do

something. And what I did was the soprano!" Madame Alvarez, taking it all in stride,

replies with dry amusement, "Thank you, Honore. That was the most charming and

endearing excuse for infidelity I've ever heard."

And on the other hand, for the status-conscious courtesans, who, though poor, seek to gain

and maintain a certain amount of cultural and social capital, marriage is figured as

something of a last resort, or final destination. "Bad table manners my dear Gigi have

broken up more marriages than infidelity," Gigi's great-aunt Alysia informs her, as they sit

down to lesson on table manners. Later Gigi asks Alysia, "Why aren't we ordinary, why

don't we get married?" referring to her grandmother's insistence Gigi refuse all social

invitations. "Marriage is not forbidden to us," Alysia explains, "but it sometimes happens

that instead of getting married at once, we get married at last." While the comedic breaks place the viewer in the position of laughing *at* marriage, it serves as the happy ending for the film, with Gigi rejecting Gaston's proposal to engage her as a courtesan, insisting they marry instead.

The character of Gigi was not the issue for FEBNO classifiers then, as she is morally correct, seeking out and securing a romantic marriage. It is those around her that are not correct, and even more problematic, it is they who deliver the punch lines, rendering Gigi humorous only in her banal predictability as compared to their quick and clever immorality. Moreover, as supporting characters their unsavory outlooks on life are not resolved by the end of the film. If FEBNO classifiers felt a movie was able to impart moral lessons on its viewers, one might anticipate they would condone young audiences to see *Gigi*, whose overarching moral is that marriage is preferable to short-term, strategic romances. Yet the majority of FEBNO members felt the film was "adults only," because the overarching moral of the film is at odds with what the audience has been positioned to find humorous. Herein lies the central source of tension and ambiguity in the film, translating into a need for the parent to step in and make a judgment call. Although the narrative arc of the film involves Gigi breaking the family mold, there is comedic friction that comes from the supporting characters and their amusing shock at Gigi's earnest matrimonial desires. Though they eventually support her marriage, they do not necessarily reform themselves.

Another film that divided classifiers while featuring a centrally sound protagonist was

another musical comedy, *Damn Yankees*, one that featured risqué dance routines and many

gendered quips. But where *Gigi* is a sophisticated comedy, *Damn Yankees* involves

ambiguous, non-verbal comedy, delivering much of its humor through choreographed

musical numbers (by the legendary American choreographer Bob Fosse). Though the film

can be read as a sentimental comedy, the choreographed element of the musical added

slapstick-esque ambiguity to its heartstring wholesomeness. In FEBNO's estimate, the film

was:

> "The tale of a modern Faust who almost sells his soul to put his favorite ball club in first place for
> the Pennant comes to the screen with the brash, topical charm of its footlight predecessor, and the
> additional advantage of the magic tricks that movie cameras can pull … Ray Walston recreates his
> famed Broadway role as the Mephistophelian stranger who turns a middle-aged fan into a twenty-
> two year old national baseball idol. Tab Hunter is just right as the clean-cut American boy whose
> sensational performance brings the Washington Senators out of the cellar and humbles the Yankee
> team to the dust. And Gwen Verdon is very special indeed as the Devil's discipline, with siren
> tactics that seem to have enough verve and enchantment to lure the most securely married man
> from the straight and narrow. But Tab holds firm and outwits Old Nick's every satanic maneuver.
> The musical numbers get first class attention, which includes choreography by Bob Fosse […]"[198]

There are also elements of sophisticated comedy, with quips about gender, wives,

seduction, and casual banter around the destruction of mortals' lives. *Damn Yankees* is a

Faustian tale of a desperate, middle-aged baseball fan that would give anything for his team

to win the series championship. Joe sells his soul to the devil, a Mr. Applegate, who

promises to turn him into a young baseball star and deliver his team to the championship.

Yet Mr. Applegate has more sinister ambitions, assigning his assistant Lola to the task of

seducing Joe (comfortably married to the homely Meg) while he plots a way to bring Joe's

team to the brink of winning but ultimately cause them to lose, bringing the team's fans a

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[198] Ibid., 'Damn Yankees,' November, 1958.

world of pain. Though Joe is not so short sighted. In negotiating an "escape clause," Joe exclaims, "I've got my wife to consider!" "Wiiiives," Mr. Applegate sneers. "They cause me more trouble than the Methodist Church!"

The most celebrated song of the musical, "Whatever Lola Wants, Lola Gets," is accompanied by a burlesque routine with a garish and slightly slapstick quality to it. The scene is ambiguous, as on the one hand audiences were likely aware they were watching a sort of strip act, yet the choreography is so silly it directs the laughter at the seductress Lola, and not the nervous Joe, who remains rigid and uptight throughout the number. As Lola struts and shrugs her way around the baseball locker room, her movements become increasingly exaggerated the fewer items of clothing she dons, giving the routine a disarming comedic quality. While Lola makes an adorable fool of herself, Joe eventually manages to flee the locker room, his fidelity intact. While there are many morally easier moments (such as the saccharine song in which Meg, missing Joe, wonders, "For without a husband, what is a wife?"), such obvious moments of morality may not have been enough to counter-balance the choreographed seduction in practically all of Lola's dance numbers.

Not all of the comedic breaks in the film were ambiguous however. Humor was also built around the local reporter, a woman named Gloria who bears the brunt of sexist jokes intended to undermine her professional and inquisitive journalistic nature. Though she rebuffs the jokes and maintains some dignity she also entertains the jabs, allowing audiences to laugh without questioning the moral appropriateness of the humor. In one

scene, Benny, the baseball team manager, arrives on the field early in the morning and notices Gloria already there. "We didn't invite the press this morning," he tells her. "Aw Benny, you're very foolish to have this prejudice against me just because I'm a woman. My paper gives you as much space as the others do," she counters. "I only wondered why you got down here so early!" Benny replies. "I came down to see the naked men," Gloria rebuts, to which Benny smirks and nods. "Could be!" This is an easy comedic exchange, wherein the values of neither Benny nor Gloria are put in serious question, and the power balance between men and women, while pointed out, is left intact. (Note that Benny maintains the last word between them, reinforcing the normative gender imbalance and rendering this exchange unambiguous.) The choreographed humor, blending sex appeal with intentional corniness and creating questions as to what exactly an audience might find humorous, is much more ambiguous in comparison to such verbal exchanges.

By the film's close, the deal with the devil goes awry, Joe's team wins the championship, and Joe returns home to his wife. Yet many organizations found reason to disagree about where the film should be located along their age-based moral categorization schema. The discord between the harmonious narrative resolution and the musical's most entertaining dance routines created enough interpretive ambiguity for the classifiers to disagree over how the film should be labeled. This discord placed the responsibility among parents, turning ambiguity into a resource for generating cultural authority.

Yet not all films that created consternation among the classifiers involved such obvious

moral dissonance. Unlike *Gigi* and *Damn Yankees, Teacher's Pet* is a sentimental, romantic

comedy that, despite its lack of ambiguity, presented a few hitches to the classifiers.

FEBNO wrote:

> "The relative importance of education and experience in training a reporter is given an entertaining
> airing in this romantic comedy. Clark Gable, a self-made, hard-boiled city editor, attempts to embarrass
> college journalism instructor Doris Day by posing as a new student in her class. Miss Day, daughter of a
> world-famous country editor, becomes excited over the fresh talent she thinks she has discovered, and a
> heap of comic misunderstandings is piled up before the truth comes out, and each discovers that there's
> a lot to the other's point of view. Gig Young, a psychology professor who can do practically anything
> except avoid a hangover, and night-club entertainer Mamie Van Doren bring a little competition into the
> romantic side of the situation. The lines are snappy, the cast is lively, and everyone seems to have a good
> time [...]"[199]

The film tells the story of a self-made city newspaper editor, Gannon, who finally deals with

the chip on his shoulder over his lack of a university education. Only after mocking it does

Gannon realize his issue lies not with education per se but with his personal insecurity.

Much of the humor is derived from the conventional trope of the mistaken identity,

compounded by Columbia University journalism instructor Erica Stone's attractiveness.

When Gannon first meets Stone he is lingering along the side of the classroom, waiting to

catch her just before class begins in order to apologize for a rather rude letter he had

written in response to her request for a guest lecture from him. "They got dames teaching

journalism classes now!" he had exclaimed earlier to his editor, who ordered him to

apologize to Stone, whose father was a well-respected editor. But as Stone strides in,

Gannon's eyebrows flash up and his eyes roll down as she advances to the front of the

room. Not realizing she is the professor, he sits uncomfortably in the classroom while she

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[199] Ibid., 'Teacher's Pet,' April 1, 1958.

proceeds to lambast him to the class, she not realizing his presence. Embarrassed, but intent on seeing her again, Gannon poses as a journalism student in the class, and continues to attend.

Gannon proceeds to eye Stone's posterior several times in the film, both in the classroom and outside of it, each time she appearing oblivious to his advances. "What sort of thing would you like to tackle next?" she asks him in her office after class, proposing he take on extra work seeing as how he has such a "natural talent" for journalism. Gannon's eyes again wander southward, and his clipped, "Well I –" leaves little question in the discerning viewer's mind what he would like to tackle next. (This sort of sight gag and double entendre has been identified by scholars as a way around the standards of American film production, stipulated by the Production Code and employed in Hollywood from the late 1920s to the mid-1960s.) Stone believes she has discovered unknown journalistic talent and is enthusiastic to mentor him, inviting comedic misunderstandings which rely on the audience's knowledge that Gallagher, Gannon's pseudonym in class, is really Gannon, that he's attracted to Stone but also intimidated by her, and that Stone is oblivious to both his identity and his intentions.

Stone's attractiveness is also employed for comedic purposes in the drinking scene to which many FEBNO classifiers gave vocal condemnation (three organizations gave the film an "adults only" rating because of it), featuring club performer Mamie Van Doren as Gannon's cheap date. Bumping into Gannon at the nightclub while on a date with famed

psychologist Hugo Pine, Stone invites Gannon to join their table while they watch Van

Doren's routine, in which she claims to have been, "The Girl Who Invented Rock 'n Roll."

Stone notices Gannon's embarrassment at Van Doren's cheeky performance, and smirks

with pleasure. (Note that this is an adult sphere in which one is claiming to have invented

rock 'n roll, heavily associated with teenagers, further infantilizing or diminishing

Gannon's date and rendering Stone more sophisticated.) There is also much humor

derived from the rival for Stone's attention, Hugo Pine, who is working on a book project

with Stone. He intimidates Gannon as well, who proceeds to bribe the waiter to spike

Pine's drinks, causing Pine to pass out. But Gannon soon learns that Pine is not sexually

interested in Stone, with hints of homosexuality in his performance. Turning to him for

advice about how to court Stone, comedy is generated between the two men, as Gannon

learns to deal with his inferiority complex and successfully gain Stone's affection.

The moral message in *Teacher's Pet* is not ambiguous, yet many groups disagreed over the

classification of the film. By sympathizing with Gannon the audience sympathizes with a

man who comes to compromise with the woman he loves and surmount his own

insecurities. Yet the film also included a scene with heavy drinking, and because Hugo was

not yet revealed as a non-competitor for Stone's affection, the act of poisoning one's

competitor with alcohol was not condemned in the film. Similar to *Gigi* and *Damn

Yankees*, *Teacher's Pet* relied on a narrative resolution that left some room for moral

ambiguity and thus a specific sort of space for interpretation on the part of the audience.

Could mature young audiences be trusted to properly identify and interpret moral

ambiguity for what it was, and err on the side of proper in their own actions upon leaving the cinema? Evidenced by the multiple labels attached to each title, these films indicate a type of narrative about which classifiers did not reach a unified decision, constituting a form of cinematic filth which was not dealt with in the manners theorized by Mary Douglas, but rather was exposed for what it was. By identifying filth in terms of ambiguity, parent/adult viewers and readers of FEBNO's pamphlets were responsibilized to re-calibrate their readings and decisions of the film's message and appropriate for their teenage children, and were encouraged to follow an organization whose opinions, religious identities, or professional viewpoints most closely matched their own. In this way, cultural authority among parent readers was also tethered to other contextual identities and associations.

5.7) Textual matters, moral classification decisions, and burgeoning parental cultural authority

Classification and interpreting processes are highly social endeavors (Childress and Friedkin 2012). Even where explicit guidelines exist for classifying a film, rules and limits are constantly negotiated between actors (Jacobs 1991). How might sociologists weigh in on the question of what renders one filmic text appropriate for a specific audience, and another inappropriate? In order to say more about the narrative quality of such boundary disagreements, I argue social scientists might fruitfully turn to the contents of cultural texts and objects. As an organization that encompassed many organizations, the Film Estimate Board of National Organization classifiers allowed for classificatory dissonance in their review pamphlet, enabling the umbrella organization to weather many storms in terms of

interpretive disagreements over films (rather than languish in categorical gridlock). This chapter argued that perceptions of ambiguity are associated with narrative morality, made manifest through a unique feature of my archival materials. Furthermore, narrative ambiguity was converted into a resource for parental cultural authority, as parents of the new teenage audience became responsibilized for their viewing habits. Films with comedic performances were especially difficult to locate on FEBNO's age-based classification scheme when a narrative structure involved conflicting, and often comedic, types of moral messages. The ambiguity over how to classify such titles, indicative of deeper disagreements about which narratives are appropriate for whom, enabled parents to begin asserting a new cultural authority and moral responsibility over their children.

While social science scholarship on filmic content often focuses on the quantifiable aspects of a film, there are other observable qualities that are essential for understanding the perceived moral limits of a film. By comparing three comedies which classifiers unanimously labeled as "mature young adult" appropriate with three comedies classifiers struggled to classify, this chapter demonstrates those films whose overarching morals were unsupported by its humor were associated with multiple labels and thus interpretive, moral, and classificatory ambiguity. Methodologically, this chapter evidenced the empirical richness scholars may glean from turning to the text of a film. Such empirical material is critical to revealing classification trends. Should such material be disregarded, the substantive question of what makes a film appropriate for a specific audience is lost from the realm of sociological focus. By developing a set of key questions and applying them,

through close viewings, to a set of purposefully selected titles, sociologists might more comfortably and thoroughly engage with such cultural texts as films, but also other empirical instances where an observable narrative is present in a text or object. Narrative resolution was not enough for a comedy to be interpreted by reviewers and classifiers as appropriate for teenage audiences; such resolutions needed to be supported by the film's humor. Those films whose humor did not support an overall clean and digestible moral created ambiguity among classifiers as to the appropriate audience for a film, and transferred the final decision making responsibility onto parents.

By noting their differences, FEBNO responsibilized readers to take a certain amount of initiative, granting them a certain sense of agency in arriving at their own conclusions over the appropriate limits of morality for their children. Such an apprehension of cinema, as an object with complicated narratives and multiple possible interpretations, ultimately granted the medium a complexity that other content control mechanisms, such as explicit censorship, disallowed. Such interpretive complexities enabled audience types to multiply, embracing the notion that certain types of films were appropriate for certain types of audiences, and foreshadowing the reliance on psychological and developmental milestones (which later organizations, such as Common Sense Media, will come to embrace). Cinema for FEBNO was both an entertaining and educational medium, which, harnessed in the right ways, enabled the right audiences to ensure the least amount of moral repercussion while gleaning enjoyment and education. Similarly, by declaring a title unfit for viewership by a certain audience, parents were responsibilized by default.

Throughout the 1960s the United States seemed to be changing at a brisk pace. The conflict in Vietnam was intensifying, with more American forces involved than before. The murder of three civil rights workers in Mississippi introduced a deadly element to that struggle. President Kennedy's assassination created an emotional stir in the country, which the Warren Commission attempted to ease. Elsewhere, the Beatles were claiming the hearts of millions of American girls, and Bob Dylan's protest songs were strongly resonating with teenagers and those in their twenties. These developments are reflected in shifting motion picture sensibility as well. As the sexually charged *Tom Jones* took home the 1964 Academy Award for best picture, cultural norms seemed to be under attack from all sides.

As these changing social conditions highlighted the economic drain on the industry being caused by the Production Code Authority, the industry began to rally around the notion of dismantling the office. Relinquishing the PCA in 1966, the industry's trade association turned instead to the institution of a movie ratings system, embodied by the Code and Ratings Administration (CARA).[200] There was much continuity between the PCA and CARA, least of which was not just the use of the word *code* in the new organization's title but also in the personnel that remained in the organization after its re-vamping. In addition, two major U.S. Supreme Court decisions (*Interstate Circuit v. Dallas,* and *Ginsberg v. New York)*, as well as renewed attempts to create national film classification legislation, pushed the industry to adopt its classification scheme. That this transition from regulation

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[200] Today, the organization is known as the Classification and Ratings Administration.

to ratings was built on the work of FEBNO reviewers goes largely unacknowledged by scholars and historians of the industry, but is critical to point out in the overarching development of cultural authority and moral responsibility among parents. The next chapter will consider how such authority has also been extended to child viewers, while also being inscribed into media environments by the organization Common Sense Media.

Chapter 6
Moral Ambiguity as a Resource in Contemporary Media Ratings

6.1) Discourse and tension in the work of Common Sense Media

What sorts of knowledge are parents expected to possess about their child, and what are

parents assumed to do with such knowledge? Founded in 2003, the nonprofit organization

Common Sense Media (CSM) is a membership organization which rates movies, as well as

television shows, books, video games, music, apps, and websites. CSM describes itself as,

"the nation's leading independent non-profit organization dedicated to empowering kids to

thrive in a world of media and technology." Their target audience is delineated as,

"Families, educators, and policymakers," who, "turn to Common Sense for unbiased

information and trusted advice to help them learn how to harness the positive power of

media and technology for all kids."[201] Despite the emphasis this organizational bio places

on the beneficial power of media, this chapter will demonstrate that CSM also positions

media as having harmful repercussions on children and youth, at times with a heavier

emphasis on the latter than the former.

CSM's work also evidences a simultaneous focus on morally responsible children and the

development of apps and tools for responsible-free roaming. Here, moral responsibility is

posited as a resource for parents to generate new knowledge about their own moral

boundaries, knowledge which raters and reviewers hope will guide parents' viewing

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[201] Both quotes https://www.commonsensemedia.org/about-us/our-mission (accessed February 5, 2015).
Because CSM focuses on media beyond the movies, the scope of this dissertation is necessarily slightly
expanded here. While I do not engage fully with these other media forms, the application of the analytic
categories constructed here could certainly be extended to other media in future research.

decisions for themselves and their children. The ultimate telos of CSM's work is to define

ethical behavior by parents as the nurturing of a healthy to the unavoidable and pervasive

media environment that surrounds their children. Yet this goal wavers between

problematizing both parents and psychological experts as holding the utmost authority. In

examining this instability, I will focus on the reviews, blogs, reports, and research of CSM

and the discourse they employ in presenting contemporary parents with the various

practices and expert knowledge intended to make a safer media consumer of their

child(ren). These themes will be explored in this chapter, connecting the work of this

current-day organization to the earlier discussed research of educational sociologist Edgar

Dale in the larger re-defining of parental responsibility and moral authority in proper

media viewing habits.

This responsibilization of parents and consumers relies on a different sensibility of morally

acceptable and unacceptable media content, where moral ambiguity is more of a boon than

a danger in morally policing media consumption. I will also discuss Foucault's notion of

modes of subjection to the analysis, relying on the term "appropriate" as opposed to "filth,"

in order to draw out the differences between the responsibilization of parents today as

opposed to parents of the past, and the development of moral ambiguity as a resource.

The notion of compensating moral values employed by Hollywood censors and New York

State censors as a mechanism for managing plot resolutions will also be compared with the

current day practices of reviewing and rating films by CSM. In contrast to the past, CSM

highlights narrative ambiguity in media as an opportunity for parents to instruct their

children and gather knowledge about their own personal boundaries, rather than a deleterious element of a movie to be contained or edited away. Other points of comparison include the responsibilization of viewers constructed in the work of the film appreciation movement, spearheaded by Edgar Dale as discussed in chapter 4, and the work of parent reviewers at the Film Estimate Board of National Organizations as discussed in chapter 5.

Focusing on movie reviews, blogs, and the research studies and reports conducted by CSM, I will examine the echoes and dissonance between CSM's contemporary discourse and the techniques through which they ascribe characteristics of appropriateness, repercussion, and responsibility. Providing details on the ratings metrics, thematic and topical discussions taking place on the website, and the questions and arguments CSM makes through its research literature, this chapter evidences the overt rhetoric of individualized choice and the at-times uncomfortable ways in which such responsibility is merged with the opinions of reviewers, writers, and researchers. A central tension in CSM's work will be highlighted, by focusing on the continual references to both the positive and negative aspects of media consumption. On the one hand CSM argues for and constructs a media environment for children consumers that is safe, and structured off from questionable content. On the other hand, explicit censoring for kids is seen as *inauthentic,* and much of CSM's discourse argues for instilling moral authority and proper media values in all viewers, even children. In this way, CSM impresses a moral authority on a set of actors, such as child viewers, who were not previously held responsible on their own terms. This tension between instilling

moral responsibility and authority, and creating spaces where children can view content

unsupervised (and thus without responsibility) will be explored in depth in this chapter, as

well as the ways in which moral authority is converted into a moral resource in the larger

shift from regulation to ratings.

6.2) "We believe in sanity, not censorship"[202]

Common Sense Media further describes its mission as the following:

> "Media and technology are at the very center of all our lives today -- especially our children's. Kids today spend over 50 hours of screen time every week. The media content they consume and create has a profound impact on their social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development. Learning how to use media and technology wisely is an essential skill for life and learning in the 21st century. But parents, teachers, and policymakers struggle to keep up with the rapidly changing digital world in which our children live and learn. Now more than ever, they need a trusted guide to help them navigate a world where change is the only constant."[203]

By positioning kids as being under the constant impact of their media environments, CSM

envisions itself as a provider of unbiased information, empowering the parties they

responsibilize with the tools necessary to make informed decisions: parents, educators,

policymakers. In this formulation, the child is responsibilized as well, as media usage is a

skill children need to be taught, by the accurately informed adults surrounding them. "We

believe in sanity, not censorship," CSM's mission page adds.[204] To this end, CSM

positions itself differently from the raters and classifiers of the past, as well as the present

Motion Picture Association of America's ratings administration, known as the

Classification and Ratings Administration. This difference is located in the transparency

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[202] https://www.commonsensemedia.org/about-us/our-mission (accessed January 26, 2015).

[203] https://www.commonsensemedia.org/about-us/our-mission (accessed January 26, 2015).

[204] Ibid.

of the former organization, and the complete lack of transparency in the latter. CSM's

parent bloggers and reviewers are identified by their first and last names, with photos and

bio pages, always including the number of children they parent. The MPAA on the other

hand has come under scrutiny and criticism for its lack of transparency around the

identities of classifiers, as well as the rubric or guidelines along which they classify films.[205]

It is important to note that these instances of transparency, or lack thereof, correlate to

different manners of responsibilizing different positions, actors, and roles.

Distance from an audience, and less transparency of reviewers and classification practices,

is linked with a less legible responsibilization of viewers, or the individual roles within the

audience. (The responsibility of the industry is also implicated differently depending on

how responsibilizes the audience.) In the case discussed in this chapter, the industry is

held accountable for producing better content, but the ultimate and underlying

responsibility to foster a respect, demand, and expectation for better content rests with the

parent. This is in contrast to the censors of New York State, for example, whose work

granted viewers little space to make responsible choices, attempting instead to eliminate

the chance audiences would see inappropriate material to begin with. Such censors were

very secretive over their identities by way of office protocol, an element of their position I

associate with less transparency. Thus, this research supports the claim that when moral

boundaries are drawn with transparency, less responsibilization is encoded in the work of

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[205] See Sharon Waxman's article in *The Washington Post* from April 8, 2001, titled, "Rated S, for Secret; A Former Film Rater Breaks the Code of Silence and Tells How 13 People Judge 760 Movies a Year," or the 2006 documentary, *This Film Is Not Yet Rated.*

content control actors, while audiences are responsibilized to monitor, or censor, themselves.

CSM's boards of directors and advisors are crowded with PhDs, education professionals, communications and media professors, consultants, and investment managers. Two U.S. Federal Communications Commission affiliates, former chairman Newton Minow who sits on the board of advisors, and former commissioner Deborah Taylor Tate sits on the board of directors, are also included in this bevy of expert knowledge.[206] Since its founding, CSM has invoked the figure of the public interest in making its claims. CSM founder and CEO Jim Steyer has stated, "We can pressure the media industry itself, and the now completely dormant F.C.C. (Federal Communications Commission), to balance the public interest."[207]

Aside from the contrasts with New York State censors, CSM also contrasts with the work of the Film Estimate Board of National Organizations. Where FEBNO responsibilized parents as being capable of and obligated to make the right choice for their children, the child was not discussed in a way that necessitated intimate knowledge of the child, or knowing the child best. By listing more than one classification for a film where reviewing

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[206] This is reminiscent of the way in which Hollywood's internal censorship organization, the Production Code Authority, recruited former state censors to work for the organization, after they left their position as civil servants. One difference is that these contemporary civil servants do not bring their expertise to an internal overseer of filmic content, nestled within the production hub of Los Angeles, but rather to an organization which has established itself as an outside monitor, or watchdog, of media practices and production, while also attempting to influence policy on media regulation.

[207] A New Attempt to Monitor Media Content, May 21, 2003, *The New York Times*, http://www.nytimes.com/2003/05/21/business/a-new-attempt-to-monitor-media-content.html (accessed January 26, 2015). Steyer, an elementary school teacher who later became a public interest lawyer, has been affiliated with Stanford University's School of Education, and Department of Political Science, since the late 1980s.

organizations disagreed, FEBNO signaled parents may not be of a mind about where the boundaries lay for their children. CSM on the other hand presents a child that is unique in all aspects, and only known most intimately by the parent. This tension between knowledge about a child's boundaries and the uniqueness of every child is tied to another central tension in the work of CSM. On the one hand the organization highlights and works towards the creation of safe media environments where responsibility is built into a given app or viewing platform. On the other hand, CSM also continually discusses the importance of instilling critical and moral values in child viewers, so they may make wiser viewership choices on their own when confronted with choices about what to view. In this way, CSM both responsibilizes parents and children, and attempts to relieve them of all responsibility by creating spaces where responsibility is not a key necessity to consume media.

Despite these tensions, CSM shares similarities with the Film Estimate Board of National Organizations (discussed in the previous chapter) in their responsibilizing of the parent, and the activation of a discourse of choice. In this regard, both organizations differ greatly from the censors of New York State. To this end, CSM writes:

> "Achieving a healthy approach to media and technology can make a big difference in kids' lives today. Kids who learn to use digital media wisely can accomplish amazing things – learn new skills, explore new worlds, build new ideas, and change the world. Yet every kid has different needs. As parents and educators, *we know our kids best. Common Sense is here to help.* We can steer you away from things that are developmentally inappropriate, and help you find the hidden gems that are right for your family and your kids" (emphasis added).[208]

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[208] https://www.commonsensemedia.org/about-us/our-mission (accessed January 26, 2015).

Linking their mission page to their "Ten Beliefs," CSM's presentation of self involves the responsibilization of many actors, but emphasizes the role of parents with statements such as, "We believe parents should have a choice and a voice about the media our kids consume and create. Every family is different but we all need to make informed choices," or, "We believe that the price for free and open media is a bit of work for families. Parents need to know about the media their kids use and need to teach responsible behavior as well as manage overall media use." Children are also emphasized, with ideas such as, "We believe in teaching our kids to be savvy, respectful and responsible media users. We can't cover their eyes but we can teach them to see." CSM also responsibilizes the media, stating, "We believe that media has truly become 'the other parent' in our kids' lives, powerfully affecting their social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development," as well as the industry, with the insistence that, "We believe in age-appropriate media and that the media industry needs to act responsibly as it creates and markets content for each audience." Policy makers, regulators, and elected officials are also charged with responsibilities, with that claim that, "We believe appropriate regulations about right time, right place, and right manner exist. They need to be upheld by our elected and appointed leaders." And lastly, CSM carves out a space for their own responsibility, stating, "We believe ratings systems should be independent and transparent for all media."[209]

CSM hosts thousands of reviews and ratings of movies, television shows, video games, apps, and music, rating these media forms for their sexual content, violence, profanity, and positive role models. The language of these ratings is focused on the negative or harmful

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[209] All quotes https://www.commonsensemedia.org/about-us/our-ten-beliefs (accessed January 26, 2015).

aspects of any piece of media, though for the visitor who reads a full or extended review, questions are offered to help start discussions of context and content together (discussed below). CSM's ratings (also discussed below) are available through their website, as well as other digital viewing platforms such as Netflix, Comcast/Xfinity, DIRECTV, Fandango, Time Warner Cable, Cox, and AOL, and Best Buy. In 2011, Netflix launched a new "Just for Kids" tab, whose content was selected in collaboration with CSM.[210] Netflix also lists CSM's ratings for a title in the info page for it. CSM's bloggers also contribute writing to other publications, such as *The Huffington Post,* all of which spreads the organization's online presence. CSM has partnered with Google for its video production (short videos accompany many of the blog entries and reviews, as will be discussed below), and follows and stimulates scholarly research on media consumption as well as dialogue around media with university-based research centers. I will first discuss CSM's approach to rating movies and measuring the educational value of media, before turning to an extended discussion of one recent movie review page. I will then examine the ways in which CSM locates appropriateness, repercussion, and responsibility in its research studies and reports, before concluding with a discussion of the telos of media consumption forged by this reviewing and advocacy organization.

6.3) Common Sense Media and its approach to rating media

Common Sense Media describes its ratings as unbiased, independent, and, "based on age appropriateness and learning potential."[211] One section of text, "Behind the Common

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[210] http://blog.netflix.com/2011/08/netflix-launches-just-for-kids.html (accessed February 6, 2015).

Sense Media ratings system," offers explanatory detail on the rating system developed and

employed by CSM for everything they review. Arguing certain media affect, "our kids'

social, emotional, and physical development," CSM focuses on age appropriateness and

learning potential in its ratings. Stressing the importance of individual family choice, they

write, "We know every family and every kid is different – but all families need information

to make great media choices." CSM's age-based ratings are depicted on a bar, resembling a

thermometer reading with four ranges: On (green), Pause (yellow), Off (orange), and Not

For Kids (gray). On signals that content is appropriate for those at the depicted age, pause

signals parents to "Know your child; some content may not be right for some kids," Off

signals the content is not appropriate for children that age, and Not For Kids signals

content is not appropriate for any children, of any age.

Figure 4) Common Sense Media ratings age bar (source: https://www.commonsensemedia.org/about-us/our-mission/about-our-ratings).

This age bar quickly and efficiently communicates the limits CSM identifies for a piece of

media. The use of the bar is reminiscent of the notion of developmental milestones and

charts psychologists develop and employ in communicating a range of social,

communicative, and physical capabilities and abilities children ought to acquire by certain

ages. The cognitive development of the child is positioned here between the

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[211] All quotes in this paragraph from https://www.commonsensemedia.org/about-us/our-mission/about-our-ratings (accessed January 27, 2015). CSM's learning rating is limited to apps, video games, and websites.

developmental milestones of "all children" as encompassed in such charts, and their

unique identities which parents are responsible for knowing. This tension will be come up

again in the work of CSM.

Returning to the figure above, here the title is depicted as appropriate for those 10 years

old and above, questionably appropriate for those eight to 10 years old, and inappropriate

for those age seven and younger. Going further in their explanation for how they arrive at

the scale of On, Pause, or Off, CSM rates media along specific categories: positive

messages, positive role models, ease of play, violence and scariness, sex, language,

consumerism, drinkings, drugs and smoking, and privacy and safety (some of these

categories are not applicable to movies, as CSM rates media beyond cinema). These

categories are rated along a scale of zero to five (five indicating a high amount of that

category present in the content), and are then grouped together on individual pages for

films in a section titled, "What parents need to know." (Aside from these thematic ratings,

this section also includes a paragraph review of the film, its contents, and its larger

messages, all of which will be discussed in detail in the next section of this chapter.)

Figure 5) Common Sense Media ON, PAUSE, OFF Categories (source: https://www.commonsensemedia.org/about-us/our-mission/about-our-ratings).

Movie reviews are organized around these core themes, and specific issues elaborated on where relevant. The discussions that dominate concerns among CSM reviewers are sex, violence, and drugs, drinking and smoking. Concerns about sex include sexual content such as nudity, with discussions about how much nudity is involved and whether it is female or male nudity, descriptions of present sexual situations and references to sexual situations, and the types of relationships between characters that are involved in sexual situations, highlighting whether the characters in a consensual relationship, whether it is monogamous, and whether it is heterosexual. Concerns about violence will be discussed in more detail in the section following this one.

Discussions about drugs, drinking and smoking tend to take on tones that invoke the notion of moral compensating values. In the 2015 release, *Straight Outta Compton,* the reviewer notes, "Characters drink frequently throughout (with no consequences), and drug use and smoking are shown."[212] The lack of consequences for the characters' inappropriate behavior resonates strongly with decisions made by the New York State censors as well as the Production Code Authority when negotiating and reviewing a film's appropriateness for public consumption. That unpunished inappropriate on-screen behavior continues to be an issue when deliberating on a film's moral worth is an important link between the present day mentality of assessing cinematic moral worth and previous such models, as it

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[212] https://www.commonsensemedia.org/movie-reviews/straight-outta-compton (accessed August 25, 2015).

draws attention to the underlying sense of balancing scales between right and wrong which continue to inform an overall judgment about content and its moral worth.

Another metric CSM assigns to media is an overall media quality, based on these more specific topical ratings. Most recently, CSM has developed a search platform called Graphite (www.graphite.org), a service and platform aimed at connecting educators and teachers with apps and learning technologies that are deemed effective in the classroom. Though tangential for the topic at hand, I want to highlight the learning dimensions along which CSM rates and reviews education products, in order to give a sense of how the organization understands educational value and positive impact in media usage. Along with subject areas, CSM considers whether an app or product teaches thinking and reasoning, creativity, self-direction, emotional development, communication and collaboration, responsibility and ethics, tech skills, and health and fitness.[213] While Graphite is also presented in a discourse that emphasizes the individuality of children, and thus the responsibility of the parents and teachers surrounding them to guide them towards the right choices, CSM's ratings are of secondary importance to the cognitive development of the child. Such development is depicted either on a scale along which CSM ranks media, or as the aim and outcome of consuming media. In both instances, cognitive development is granted a central role in the presentation of the search engine and the benefits of its use. Choice, individual knowledge, and parental responsibility are presented as secondary devices that localize the anonymity of developmental milestones.

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[213] https://www.graphite.org/how-we-rate-and-review (accessed February 6, 2015).

The industry discusses Common Sense Media for its partnership capacity with service providers, content providers, and platforms and apps, noting their work as ratings providers. For example, CSM paired recently with U.S. satellite TV broadcaster DirecTV to create a free mobile phone app for its subscribers which hosts content rated TV-Y7 (Television Audience Age 7) or lower. CSM also partnered with YouTube and The Internet Keep Safe Coalition, testing the site's new kids app before its launch. The industry takes notice of CSM as a ratings organization that operates behind the scenes to create safe environments for young viewers where parents are not directly and only responsible for what their children watch. Hollywood takes note of CSM not for its emphasis on instilling younger viewers with self-censorship skills, but for partnering with providers and platforms to create responsibility-free spaces.

Recently, a YouTube kids app which CSM helped test was criticized by other child- and consumer-advocacy groups for turning up violent, vulgar, and sexual content in its search function.[214] The app is accused of falling short of its promise to create a space for younger viewers that is thoroughly removed and separate from content for adult viewers. CSM's work with DirecTV was also positioned as an attempt to create a content safe space, as CSM's age-based ratings and reviews will be incorporated into DirecTV's kids app. According to one DirecTV employee, the app will "take the worry away from watching TV and give kids a simple and safe viewing environment without the need for complicated

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[214] See "Advocacy Groups Slap YouTube Kids App for Inappropriate Content," at http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/advocacy-groups-slap-youtube-kids-796827 (accessed August 17, 2015).

parental-control setup on multiple devices."[215] It is critical to point out the term

"environment" in these news items, as both app are portrayed by industry reporters as

clean spaces in which children can watch content without parental scrutiny, and parental

worry. The industry's attention to this work focuses on the criticism it is garnering, rather

than paying any detailed attention to the categorization, moral limits, and boundaries of

the organization's ratings.

In a move that directly resonates with the Production Code Authority's work, CSM has

recently begun granting seals of approval to films it finds exemplary. The industry also

took notice of this development, discussing the merits of employing the seal in

promotional and marketing material for a film. In an article about the first seal, granted

last October to the Disney film, *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day*,

Steyer is quoted as saying, ""Our goal is to help kids and parents make good choices and to

incentivize high quality, great content," and including that, "The big winners here are

consumers and film studios."[216] But studios have yet to highlight these seals in any serious

or consistent way in their promotional strategies for their films. This supports the notion

that the industry takes note of CSM as a ratings and consumer advocacy organization

which is noteworthy in its partnership capacity, and whose focus lies in creating

responsibility-free viewing environments. While it is accurate to position Common Sense

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[215] See "DirecTV Launches Kids TV App for Apple Mobile Devices," at
http://variety.com/2015/digital/news/directv-kids-tv-app-apple-1201502743/ (accessed August 18, 2015).

[216] See "Family Advocacy Group Gives its First Seal of Approval to Upcoming Disney Film," at
http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/family-advocacy-group-gives-first-737787 (accessed August 17, 2015).

Media as an organization that works to create kid-safe viewing zones, the question of how Common Sense Media creates its ratings still represents the bulk of CSM's work, even if it remains unexamined by the industry. Below, I will highlight how choice and responsibility are implicated in the movie review page for a recent film, *American Sniper,* highlighting the moral ambiguity that is (unintentionally) created by the rating service and drawing attention to the points at which parental knowledge is called upon to appropriately locate one's child along the spectrum of cognitive development.

6.4) Anatomy of a movie review: the case of American Sniper *(2014)*

A visitor to Common Sense Media looking for information on a specific title arrives within a few clicks at the specific page for each movie they have reviewed. At the top of the page is the title of the film, its review date, MPAA rating, genre, release year, and run time, along with the poster image of the film. In addition to this, each entry for a film has additional sections of text, "What's the story," "Is it any good?," "Families can talk about," and additional movie details. The tone of these texts is colloquial, and almost personable, with parents at times being addressed simply as "you." Let us take the example of *American Sniper* (2014).

 "Common Sense Media says, Powerful, personal, violent story of war and its aftermath," CSM writes in their capsule review of the title. They include their age bar right underneath this, in this case for age 17 and up, and their star rating, here a four out of five. Underneath this quick and digestible information is an image bar with thumbnail images

visitors can scroll through. The first is a short video review of the movie from CSM. Right next to this is the official trailer for the movie, along with a handful of film stills. CSM's video review of the film, staged like an evening news cast, presents a young woman with glasses standing in front of a screen, which is showing footage from the film. The video review cuts from here into the footage itself, with the woman's voice used as voice over while she describes the content and concern for the film. In the case at hand, the script reads:

> "Bradley Cooper takes aim at the horrors of war in *American Sniper*. This intense film tells the true story of Navy SEAL Chris Kyle, the most lethal marksman in U.S. history. No surprise here, there's plenty of violence as Kyle guns down the enemy. Watch out for kids in danger, plus loads of shooting, death, and blood. On the flip side the film may trigger some discussions about the meaning of patriotism. Common Sense says *American Sniper* is ok for teens age 17 and up."[217]

Figure 6) Common Sense Media video review of American Sniper (2014) *(source: https://www.commonsensemedia.org/movie-reviews/american-sniper).*

This script is similar to the paragraph description in the "What parents need to know" section (discussed below), but slightly pared down. The video presents a violent/patriotic dialectic, which the text review also mentions. Though there is violence, or as the commentator phrases it, "loads of shooting, death and blood," these images may be deemed worth enduring by parents interested in having conversations with their children

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[217] https://www.commonsensemedia.org/movie-reviews/american-sniper (accessed January 27, 2015).

about what and how they understand patriotism. Here the viewer is responsibilized, and subtly presented with a decision: does a potential conversation about patriotism outweigh concerns about depictions of violence?

Underneath the image bar is the "What parents need to know" section. CSM describes this first section as, "a short guide to all the essential information that parents need to know to make a decision quickly ~ or manage a decision that's already been made."[218] This section is a five to eight sentence paragraph that begins with a brief plot summary, and is followed by a discussion of the themes and topics present in the film, as well as the controversy surrounding a title, should there be one. *American Sniper*, a recent from from director Clint Eastwood that has sparked debates over meaning, morality, and appropriateness, is presented by CSM as such:

> "Parents need to know that *American Sniper* is a Clint Eastwood-directed biopic of Chris Kyle (Bradley Cooper), a Navy SEAL sniper with the most confirmed kills on record. It's very intense and violent, with shootings, blood, mangled bodies, kids in danger, violence against children, explosions, and lots of general stress and tension. Language is likewise extremely strong, with frequent uses of "f--k," "s~t," and more. Two adults have a sexual relationship and are intimate. They think about sex, and the woman is pregnant during the story, though nothing sensitive is shown. There's heavy drinking during an early scene set in a bar, to the point of vomiting. *Parents will vary in their opinion of Kyle's heroism; he may be too violent for some, but his patriotism and service ~ plus his assistance of veterans with PTSD ~ may sway others. The movie also has a complex and subtle message about the war in Iraq; it's possible to see both sides of the argument*" (emphasis added).[219]

I want to draw attention to the last two sentences of this paragraph. Here, CSM offers two possible stances a parent or guardian might take on the film and the message delivered through its main character: on the one hand he could be too violent, on the other he is

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[218] https://www.commonsensemedia.org/about-us/our-mission/about-our-ratings (accessed January 27, 2015).

[219] https://www.commonsensemedia.org/movie-reviews/american-sniper (accessed January 27, 2015).

very patriotic and a Good Samaritan. Avoiding an explicit opinion of their own, CSM

adds the film's stance on the Iraq War can be read in one of two ways, though they do not

articulate what precisely these two sides of the argument are. In some sense, *American*

Sniper is an ideal film for CSM in terms of what it offers for beginning discussion, debate,

or dialogue between parents and children. These are the key elements for the organization

in localizing parental responsibility in the media consumption habits of younger viewers.

The film provides enough space for both sides of an argument, and from these debates

parents can plug in the knowledge they have about their children with the guidelines

offered by CSM. As a result, the review both avoids articulating any tangible political

opinion, while offering parents a model for "good" parenting.

The particular model of good parenting at play in this review brings to mind the

psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg's (1981) levels and stages of moral development. For

Kohlberg, the form and structure of moral reasoning and thought processes advanced not

in a cumulative fashion, but in an abstract and relational manner. Moving from an

instrumental and individual based level to a level of principles and autonomy, moral

reasoning is projected as becoming loosened from an individual's group memberships and

identities over time. Echoing these thoughts, CSM ranks the film as appropriate for older

youth who are thought to be capable of reasoning through moral dilemmas such as

whether the character Chris Kyle is a hero or morally reprehensible with the guidance of

their parents and the contextualizing conversations to be had after viewing the film. A

visitor to the site is given room to read their own concerns and views into this text. To

continue with the example at hand, what are the two sides of the argument about Iraq? Is

it over whether the United States should have, or should not have, been present in Iraq? Is

it that American presence in Iraq was justified or not? Is it a larger debate over the value

and effects of war? All of these questions can be imposed – and addressed – by the

individual reader of this review.

To the side of the review is the section "What parents need to know section," which as

rates films on a scale of one to five along the themes of positive messages, positive role

models, violence, etc. CSM cautions parents that *American Sniper* ranks only a one out of

five for positive messages, stating, "Discussion-prompting themes include patriotism, war,

family, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, though no hard conclusions are drawn."[220]

Rating the film a two out of five for positive role models, CSM reviewers write,

"Depending on your perspective, a Navy SEAL sniper with the most confirmed kills may or

may not be considered a hero/role model. Regardless, his attempts to help wounded

soldiers and soldiers with PTSD are clearly admirable." This information continues to

responsibilize the reader, preparing them for any potential viewing of this film, or not, and

laying out the questions that may shape the debate and moral reasoning involved in their

conclusions-making practices.

The prompt "Depending on your perspective" is a clear address to the reader that it is their

perspective that will dictate what they decide about *American Sniper*, its message(s), and its

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[220] All quotes in this paragraph https://www.commonsensemedia.org/movie-reviews/american-sniper, click
the "See full details" + sign (accessed January 28, 2015).

worth as a film. This responsibilizes the reader, addressed as the parent but potentially any other visitor to the site, to arrive at a decision over the values and worth of the actions of the eponymous sniper, theoretically before viewing the film themselves or granting their children permission to see it. Regardless of whether a parent waited to see the film after reading the CSM review of it, or saw it beforehand and is now turning to CSM for aid, it is suggested they reason their way through the themes of patriotism, heroic actions, post-traumatic stress, and war. Eschewing obvious, easy, or overt formulations, these questions are posed in a way that requires a certain amount of debate and dialogue among parents and children, or viewers of the film. In this sense, parents who use CSM's services are responsibilized to know thematically what a film deals with, to have a sense of the types of questions and debates they may have with their children after viewing a film, and to have the most intimate knowledge about what kind of moral reasoning their children are able to engage in along the developmental range.

Directly below this information are three additional sets of movie reviews: user reviews, parent reviews, and kids reviews. Here are the reader will potentially come upon two additional ages for appropriate audiences, depending on the film. In the example used here, the parent reviews were averaged to suggest the film is appropriate for those ages 13 and up, while the kids' reviews are averaged at age 15 and up. This may not be entirely accurate however. The parent reviews include a teenager who identifies himself in the subject line of his review, for example. (How many other instances of mismatched voices occur on the website is difficult to say, but it is unlikely this is the only instance.) Users

may click on each link and be directed to a new page with either all the reviews for the film, only parent reviews, or only kids' reviews. Depending on whether these numbers match one another, as well as the age provided by CSM, a user is again confronted with a sense of ambiguity and decision-making. Whose age recommendation they wish to follow is a choice they are subtly tasked with making.

Following these additional reviews are further text sections written by the CSM reviewer for the film. These are, "What's the story," "Is it any good?," and "Families can talk about…" I will discuss these in turn. "What's the story" presents a plot synopsis that does not involve any of the additional moral or thematic issues presented in the initial description at the top of the page. The writing style here hems closely to the plot without additional details about violence, language, or message. The section "Is it any good" allows for more of the reviewer's voice than the previous sections. Here, the reviewer passes judgment on the directorial skill, the messages and themes in a film, the acting capability, and arrives at a final star ranking out of five for the title's overall quality. In the example of *American Sniper,* the reviewer (whose name always appears toward the bottom of the page, with a link to their profile and position within the organization) places the film within Eastwood's oeuvre, noting, "as he did in the misunderstood *J. Edgar* (2011), Eastwood brilliantly inserts the character into a less black-and-white world in which there are no certainties."[221]

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[221] https://www.commonsensemedia.org/movie-reviews/american-sniper, click on the "Is it any good" tab in order to expand the section (accessed January 28, 2015).

Here the reviewer offers one way to enter the film's moral universe, as one in which the lines between right and wrong are intentionally blurred, and links this blurring to the director's style. Yet here the danger of this ambiguity in filmmaking is not interpreted as introducing the same risks to viewers as it might have for previous censors and reviewers. New York State censors and Hollywood internal censors in particular were concerned with the presence of "moral compensating values" in a film, whereby the film's close would bring criminals and wrong-doers to justice, unfaithful husbands and wives to their moral demise, and corrupt individuals who evaded the law to prison. These narrative resolutions were to serve as lessons for viewers, especially in the instance that any among them had been inspired or incited to commit similar wrongs, crimes, or offenses during the film. Yet CSM takes a different perspective, placing a very different value on textual and narrative ambiguity in a film. For *American Sniper,* the moral ambiguity of the film is an opportunity for discussions and conversations wherein parents are expected to guide their children to the correct stances and conclusions. Moral ambiguity, rather than being risky or dangerous as in previous iterations, is *valuable.*

Yet it would be inaccurate to suggest that the ambiguity valued here, which offers a form of sensitive insight into the trials and travails of various characters and situations, would be devoid of demanding any compensating moral value whatsoever. A quick counter example is CSM's review of director Martin Scorsese's latest, *The Wolf of Wall Street.* "Parents need to know," CSM writes, "that *The Wolf of Wall Street* is based on the true story of a financial

broker who bent the rules, became enormously wealthy, and was not caught for years."[222]

Adding to this in the "Is it any good?" section, CSM writes, "Leonardo DiCaprio gives a true heavyweight performance, laced with contempt, and he's never truly redeemed. Rather, Scorsese ends his movie on a scene that illustrates the pitfalls of desire, and how it can never be entirely fulfilled." Yet CSM does not direct the parent to lambast the practices of the character portrayed by Leonardo DiCaprio per se, but rather to question the character's draw and desire, among Scorsese's oeuvre. "What's the appeal of a character with such questionable morals? Martin Scorsese often makes movies about these kinds of characters. Why is he so highly respected and acclaimed?" they prompt parents ask. In this way CSM somewhat laments the lack of overt compensating moral values in the film, but instead of boycotting the film or calling for a more restrictive rating, they label the film inappropriate for children of any age while highlighting these questions for parents should they decide to view the film.

Returning to the example of *American Sniper,* the reviewer also writes that the film is "subtly balanced" between the protagonist's confidence he is rightfully protecting his country by fighting in Iraq, and the morally ambiguous backdrop. This is the first section where a user is not presented with a decision, but rather an explicit opinion on the film. These questions are reminiscent of the questions posed in Edgar Dale's manual on how to appreciate motion pictures for the young viewer (1933). "What is a Good Story?" Dale had asked, defining their criteria as, "They ought to give you an honest interpretation of these

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[222] All quotes in this paragraph from https://www.commonsensemedia.org/movie-reviews/the-wolf-of-wall-street (accessed February 16, 2015).

important problems which will be significant for your life, furnish you with a sympathetic insight into the lives of persons who have differing standards of conduct, and truthfully show you the consequences of having those standards" (1933: 86). For Dale, ambiguity was tolerable, especially if it led to a place of conversation or contemplation. But it was always preferable for an explicit resolution to the ambiguity presented in a film. In a sense, Dale expected more from the filmmaker than Common Sense Media reviewers, the latter activating the viewer to overcome lapses of moral clarity in media should, or more accurately when, they arise.

Dale's manual on how to appreciate movies can serve as a historical precedent to this manner of approaching cinema (discussed in depth in chapter 3). The section, "Families can talk about..." includes three to five bullet points with discussion items for post-screening conversation. Here the CSM reviewer suggests families discuss violence, role models, movies about war, and the discrepancies between filmic depictions of true stories, and the factual story itself. Dale had suggested viewers interpret and localize their reading of a film by way of pointed yet open-ended questions about a film, focusing on comparing the visual and textual cues in a film with the viewers' perceived reality, personal experience, and knowledge. In evaluating sets, costumes, etc., Dale made the case for appreciating realism by paying attention to such details and ultimately, their believability. One subject, titled "What is a good story," provides a revealing point of comparison between Dale's manual and the discourse of CSM, focusing particularly on their section, "Is it any good?" (discussed above). Dale wrote:

"A good motion-picture story must really do what it sets out to do ... They ought to give you an

honest interpretation of these important problems which will be significant for your life, furnish you a sympathetic insight into the lives of persons who have differing standards of conduct, and truthfully show you the consequences of having those standards."[223]

Dale argued movies, "show how people live; and that way of living is usually presented to the persons who view that picture as approved or disapproved. The movies teach lessons, therefore, whether the producers intend it or not" (1933: 87). Including a summary of standards and questions for review, the film appreciation technique stressed integrity, accuracy, clarity, and logic. "One of the most important things the motion picture can do is to show you truthfully the consequences that come from making certain choices in life," he summarized (1933: 96). Posing questions to the viewer, Dale suggested they ask whether the title was fitting, whether or not the story and characters were believable, whether the plot was too simple or too complicated, and whether the ending was logical.

Posing similar questions to viewers of *American Sniper*, the CSM reviewer writes, "How intense is it? How does it help to tell this particular story? Is it necessary?"[224] In the contemporary iteration, questions are posed to families as a unit about specific themes, in this case violence. Yet the notion of evaluating whether a certain amount of violence is necessary in telling a particular story also echoes Dale's advice to young viewers. Were the elements present absolutely necessary? Were they historically accurate? This earlier advice overlaps with another question posed by the CSM reviewer: "The movie is based on a true story. Do you think the filmmakers changed any facts? Why might they do that? How can

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[223] Dale 1933, p86.

[224] Both quotes in this paragraph from https://www.commonsensemedia.org/movie-reviews/american-sniper, (accessed January 29, 2015).

you find out what's been altered?" Years earlier, Dale had asked, "Was the story always believable? Why or why not? If the story was adapted from a play or a novel, were there any changes which you thought were good or poor? If so, where?" (1933: 96). Thus both film appreciation educators and contemporary family media bloggers place an emphasis on comparing films with other perceptions of reality, be it personal experience, source material, or "common sense."

There are two links provided in the "Families can talk about…" section, embedded in the discussion prompts. These are for the words "violence" and "role model." These links bring the user to blog posts, written by CSM bloggers (the author of both blog entries linked to the film *American Sniper* are written by Caroline Knorr, Parenting Editor, Mom of one). CSM's blog space is titled "Parenting, Media and Everything in Between.[225] Clicking on the former link, for violence, brings a user to Knorr's entry titled, "Tips on How to Deal with Media Violence." "Find out how media violence impacts kids," the article promises, "and gets tips on choosing quality, age-appropriate media."[226] Similar to the video movie reviews, there is a short video embedded in the middle of the page, where CSM founder and CEO Jim Steyer's voice is employed as voice over while images of children of perceivably different ages and ethnicities are consuming media on a host of screens, watching various types of violence: first person shooter video game violence, slapstick violence, staged violence on a celebrity talk show, domestic violence in a bedroom, a bar

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[225] https://www.commonsensemedia.org/blog, (accessed January 29, 2015).

[226] Both quotes in this paragraph from https://www.commonsensemedia.org/blog/tips-on-how-to-deal-with-media-violence (accessed January 29, 2015).

brawl between two men with a woman in the background. Steyer's voice summarizes the

longer text, just to the left of the video. In both text and video, CSM poses the dilemma as

violence is everywhere, but what is its impact on children, or "our kids," as CSM phrases it.

"The short answer is: We don't know," they admit. CSM summarizes, and presents, media

scholars as agreeing that there is more than one factor behind why a nonviolent person

may act aggressively, but that one risk factor of violent behavior is a heavy exposure to

violent media.

Rather than blame the impact of violent media on children however, the article goes on to

responsibilize the user, here assumed to be a parent, giving tips on what and how parents

can become involved. Positioning parents as the responsible parties for setting the right

tone in their families regarding media consumption, Knorr cites two pieces of research.

These studies come from two universities, University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg Public

Policy Center, and a national survey commissioned by the Center on Media and Human

Development, housed in Northwestern University's School of Communication. Both

focus on different aspects of media consumption and the attendant attitudes of viewers.

The former study, "Parental Desensitization to Violence and Sex in Movies," was published

in the peer-reviewed medical journal *Pediatrics* in 2014 (Romer et al., 2014). This study

examined the desensitization hypothesis, which maintains that as an individual is

repeatedly exposed to sex and/or violence in film and media, they becomes less sensitive to

such content, and more lenient on the appropriate age of a child or teen for exposure to

similar material. Beginning with the premise that movies contain more sexual and violent

content than in the past, the authors presented a representative sample of 1,000 parents (with at least one child aged 6-17 years old) with a random sample of three movie clips containing sexual and/or violent content, and asked them to rate them for age appropriateness.

The researchers concluded that parents *do* become desensitized to such content regardless of the order of clips they were shown. Such desensitization, "may contribute to the increasing acceptance of both types of content by both parents and the raters employed by the film industry" (ibid.: 877). The latter study, by Northwestern University, examines how parents incorporate digital technology and media into their parenting styles. While there are a host of questions the study posed, CSM picked up on the last one highlighted in the study's report, which asked, "How do different parenting practices and parents' own levels of media and technology use affect the use patterns of children in the home?"[227]

It's important to note the translation work CSM does in citing these external studies and linking their blogs to such scholarship. Northwestern University's report highlighted 10 key findings, the last of which was picked up by CSM: "Parents are creating vastly different types of media environments for their children to grow up in, and, not surprisingly, the choices they make are strongly related to their children's media use."[228] The finding that parents, rather than their children, are setting the tone for media use, creating what the

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[227] http://web5.soc.northwestern.edu/cmhd/wp content/uploads/2014/03/ParentingAgeDigitalTechnology. REVISED.FINAL_.2014.pdf, p3 (accessed January 29, 2015).

[228] Ibid., p7.

report labels a "media ecology," is adopted by CSM, but in regurgitating this finding to readers, a tone of responsibility is layered on to the parent for their children's media use. Though the report describes these media ecologies, focused on the amount of media usage and attitude toward media usage in the home, CSM creates a responsibility for the parent to be aware of what and how they consume their media, as it will necessarily affect their children's media usage. After pointing out that while all the risk factors involved in causing a person to act violently are not known, Knorr cites the former study described above, writing:

> "Heavy exposure to violent media can lead to desensitization, too. And it may actually start with parents. A study by the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania found that parents who watched a lot of movies were more likely to say *it was OK for younger kids to watch movies that had R-rated violence and sexual content*. The good news is that, as parents, we can make a choice to consistently expose our kids to media that *reflects our own personal values* and say "no" to the stuff that doesn't. *The number one influence on kids' media consumption is how their parents think and act regarding media*. There are so many benefits to media and technology, including the potential to teach valuable skills" (italics signify where hyperlinks for the two studies are located).[229]

The tone is upbeat, informative, and enthusiastic, perhaps intended to give parents the sense that they have more influence, and responsibility, than they may feel. I want to emphasize the duality through which CSM approaches media. Media can be both a positive and a negative influence on viewers, and here exposure to violence is singled out as a specifically negative influence. Knorr suggests parents remind their children of the consequences of violent behavior and actions, limit their consumption or interaction with violent media, instruct them on resolving conflicts without resorting to violence –

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[229] https://www.commonsensemedia.org/blog/tips-on-how-to-deal-with-media-violence (accessed Feb 1, 2015). See Parental Desensitization to Violence and Sex in Movies," by Romer et al. (2014) for the former study, and Wartella et al. (2013) for the latter. It's interesting to note that CSM did not emphasize the concern among the *Pediatrics* researchers that the MPAA's raters are also likely desensitized to violence and sex in media. It's possible CSM does not want to instill mistrust in the overall ratings system, though the act of responsibilizing a role or position outside extant classification systems requires a certain amount of mistrust of those systems. It is also possible Knorr did not read the *Pediatrics* study beyond the abstract.

including cartoon and verbal violence – and lastly, pay close attention to the content their children are consuming.

These tips present parents with a tangible set of things they can do about their child's media consumption, with a sense of purpose and research behind it. In this way, CSM translates research into responsibility on media consumption and its effects on children. The major difference between CSM's approach to media content and past approaches is tied to the use of the notions of ecology and media environment. Whereas previous approaches to evaluating, rating, or censoring media suggested media consumption was problematic and required some element of control, contemporary efforts attempt instead to utilize media consumption as an occasion for parents to get involved in their children's watching patterns, and influence the media environment instead of allowing the media environment to influence their children – without any input from them.

Returning to the individual page for *American Sniper*, the reviewer includes a link for another blog entry written by Knorr, tied to the issue of role models. "Is Chris Kyle a role model? What are the arguments both for and against?" the reviewer asks.[230] Knorr goes on to position media as a "gigantic super-peer," and begins with a soft warning to parents that, "there's no guarantee a star will stick to a lifestyle that kids can look up to – or that you'll approve of."[231] Echoing Steyer's characterization of the media as "the other parent," Knorr

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[230] https://www.commonsensemedia.org/movie-reviews/american-sniper (accessed February 1, 2015).

[231] All quotes in this paragraph from https://www.commonsensemedia.org/blog/why-media-role-models-matter (accessed February 1, 2015).

adds "– that's how much influence it has in your kids' lives." The quandary for parents is described in a way that blends on and off screen lives, at times in a discourse that is remarkably similar to the concerns of cinema censorship advocates of a century ago. The first instance of blending on and off screen realities regards children and their parents. "As parents," Knorr writes, "we have a natural instinct to choose who we want our kids to be friends with – and who we'd rather they not hang around. The same instinct kicks in for media role models."

As children often imitate the characters they like most, this may turn into an actual imitation of the behaviors of screen role models. Here Knorr gives the example of cigarette smoking, arguing that kids who watch role models smoke are more likely to smoke themselves. But by steering your children to the positive role models, parents can brace themselves and their children for the teenage years, when kids stop looking to their parents for the limits of media acceptability and start looking to friends and peers. Highlighting the harmful effects of negative role models, Knorr makes a statement which resonates deeply with concerns from the 1930s (see chapter 2) among New York State cinema censors: "*Negative role models – especially ones who don't suffer consequences for their actions – can encourage anti-social behavior, stereotypes, and even cruelty.* Help your kids choose positive media role models who embody the values you want to pass down (emphasis added)."[232] Again, parents are presented with a window to influence the media environment of their child, instead of allowing the media environment to dictate what will draw their children's attention.

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[232] Ibid.

This is an echo of the earlier logic of compensating moral values, as understood by Hollywood censors and state and municipal censors alike, though the way in which moral repercussion is tied to such characters and plots has shifted. In the past, characters that manage to escape unscathed from law-breaking behavior were unacceptable because of the dangers they posed to societal well being, by way of the increased likelihood that individuals would commit similar crimes in real life. This posed a threat, in the words and actions of censors, to the social and moral order of cities and towns across the United States, as well as the individual viewers themselves. Shifting back to the contemporary context, this discursive employment of moral compensating values has less harm for society, becoming more focused on the individual viewer. Advocates of the past concluded that studios were responsible and attempted to require that they work repercussions, punishment, or retribution in to the narrative by the film's close. This formulated a specific blame and responsibility that implicated viewers to some extent, but the industry to a much greater extent, granting them more agency than the viewers themselves. The contemporary construction of responsibility lays agency on the parents, as well as the viewers themselves, while implicating surrounding media influencers (identified by Knorr as television but also including YouTube, video games, Twitter and music) very little, if at all. Instead, responsibility lays on the shoulders of parents, and the critical viewing skills of their children. "Since we won't always be around, we need to be sure to instill critical-thinking skills in our kids," Knorr writes, suggesting parents with older children expose

them to media they don't necessarily approve of, in order to discuss the parts they don't like with their children.

The logic of instilling values in children that enable them to distinguish the positive from the negative on their own bears a direct link to the film appreciation movement of the 1930s. Recall that Edgar Dale's instruction manual, *How to Appreciate Motion Pictures*, laid a similar responsibility on the shoulders of the viewer, whereby viewers ought to continuously evaluate whether the actions and situations depicted on screen were harmonious with their own personal moral view and aesthetic taste. Here, a similar argument is presented by CSM, but it is presented to parents rather than to the young viewer (as is the case with Dale's manual), splitting the responsibility between parents and children while implicating both in the face of the larger media environment surrounding them.

Another difference between CSM and both the censors and film appreciation educators of the past becomes evident when considering the concept of telos. While censors remained fixated on the meretricious impact of motion pictures, film appreciation techniques emphasized the beneficial aspects of the cinema. Similarly, CSM embodies a sense of both the harmful and valuable in its tips, suggestions, and cites research for parents and their involvement with the media exposure and usage of their children. But the heart of the difference between the work of CSM and its intellectual predecessor centers on what questions, capabilities, or opportunities textual ambiguity in a film are thought to present,

and how such opportunities are presented to viewers. I will argue CSM advances a dynamic telos of media that embraces the ambiguous, while earlier attempts such as the work of Edgar Dale advanced a more factual, textual-based telos to film, which emphasized the value of clarity and a lack of ambiguity at the textual level. Ambiguity is employed differently, the specifics of which I will discuss below.

Ambiguity in a film was an undesirable element for the film appreciation movement. Dale's instructional manual continually raised the value and worth of clarity in a film, of simplicity and straightforwardness in plot, of the instruction movies offered to viewers. In asking what pictures were for, Dale argued they were to provide good examples. "The motion picture," he wrote, "can give us data about life" (1933: 207). Likening cinema to chemistry, Dale argued a film should always yield certain elements, much like a science experiment. "Harmful consequences occur to his family because of his conduct. The motion picture should teach us that in life certain effects follow from certain causes" (1933: 207). Movies, he wrote, "should show you just what problems people are facing today and the different ways that these problems can be solved. They should show you the consequences of certain ways of solving problems so that you may know what to expect if you try to work out your problems as did the persons on the screen" (ibid.). This earlier iteration of film appreciation does not applaud or utilize textual ambiguity. Instead it argues such films are not worthwhile, valuable, or appropriate cinematic fare.

On the other hand, ambiguity is valued by contemporary raters for the way it creates spaces for dialogue and development between parents and children. This is a proactive or dynamic approach to contextualizing and consuming media, a dynamic telos that is packaged in a way that intends to create unit cohesion, the unit here being the family. The earlier film appreciation movement presented a telos that was based on the individual, and positioned individual viewers themselves as the ones who held the key to unlocking the true value of a film. But CSM posits parents hold the key to aiding and guiding their children in their media consumption and critical thinking about the media they consume. While in terms of the messages a film imparts there *is* a line between harmful and valuable for CSM, this line is also drawn and maintained by the individual parent or parental unit, and to a lesser extent, their child(ren). It is not an objective part of a film, either present or absent, and thus rendering the film worthwhile or not. For example, when moral compensating values are missing in a piece of media, CSM positions parents to provide such values – their own values – evidenced in their suggestion that parents, "Flag antisocial behavior. Children like to imitate and pretend to be their favorite characters. When characters say mean things or behave cruelly, discuss the consequences."[233] In other words, the difference in telos between these two positions relies on their embrace or rejection of textual ambiguity. For contemporary reviewers, ambiguity is valuable insofar as it presents parents with the ability to guide their children through polarizing political and moral debates, while for earlier attempts at content control ambiguity was taught as a detrimental and useless aspect of a film.

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[233] https://www.commonsensemedia.org/blog/why-media-role-models-matter (accessed February 2, 2015).

Yet CSM adopts many tones and approaches to media that do not always harmonize with one another. In the same blog post, in a somewhat contradictory fashion Knorr includes specific recommendations for age groups and the content appropriate for them, suggesting decisions of appropriateness do not rest solely in the hands of parents. Parents should, for example, "Find age-appropriate content." Here, the notion of locating one's child along various developmental milestones conflict with parents' intimate and localized knowledge about their child. This conflict is better understood through Foucault's notion of the "mode of subjection," or, "the way in which the individual establishes his relation to the rule and recognizes himself as obliged to put it into practice" (1990: 27). This notion captures the way in which people are primed to understand and articulate their moral obligations, and the practices of the self that are involved in the formation of the self as an ethical self. The question here becomes, how is the consumption of cinema and media problematized as a moral action, and which modes of subjection and practices of the self were associated with such modes of being?

For CSM, media consumption is problematized along two different, and at times conflicting lines of thought: the first being generic psychological developmental models, the second the primacy of parental knowledge about their child(ren). With kids conceptualized along the developmental mode, media content poses ethical problems for a vague and broad spectrum of roles and positions, not just parents specifically. This notion bumps up against the other line of dialogue created by CSM, which positions parents as the ultimate responsible party in the consumption patterns and influences of their children

and their media exposure, who are able to make the right (or morally and ethically correct) decisions for their child because it is their knowledge of them that is the most valuable.

Knorr continues to stipulate that, "Kids ages 2-7 should be exposed to media featuring good role moles, racial and gender diversity, and no stereotypes."[234] Parents should emphasize positive role models, embodied in those who impart lessons like, "sharing and being a good friend," as well as instilling an acceptance and respect for people from diverse backgrounds. These values, of respect, tolerance and multiculturalism, are highlighted by CSM as age-appropriate material for the 2-7 year old age range, yet these suggestions are encapsulated in a discourse that argues individual parents always know best. It is this discursive and positional ambiguity that distinguishes CSM's approach to media from its predecessors, for whom developmental models were not a strong component.

Returning again to the movie page for *American Sniper*, beneath these discussion points are more technical details about the film, other suggested movie titles, or "Great handpicked alternatives," along with other relevant links (for example, "Movies starring Bradley Cooper," the actor who plays the eponymous sniper, or, "Best Action Movies for Kids") as well as links for more advice articles ("40+ Movies You (Might) Regret Showing Your Kids," or, "5 Tips for Your Kid's First Trip to the Movies"). Finally, following the box of links are user reviews, labeled "What parents and kids say." Here, the classification of media is dependent in some ways on the parents, micro-charging the act of classification. Yet there is also much that is ambiguous about where a film stands along the ratings schema. The

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[234] Ibid.

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first instance of ambiguity is the "Pause" section on the age bar. Here, CSM highlights a zone of ambiguity where a title may or may not be appropriate for a child, but a decision by the parent is required to render a film un-ambiguous in the sense of classification and moral appropriateness.

A second site of potential ambiguity among CSM's reviews is the initial "Parents need to know" section that accompanies each movie. This is an ambiguity interpreted in the message of a film, and presents parents with another instance in which they must decide what their boundaries are and classify a film accordingly. A third site of classification ambiguity is presented in the fact that there are multiple speakers present on the site, CSM reviewers, parents, and children, and the MPAA's rating. For example, *American Sniper* is labeled by CSM as appropriate for viewers age 17 and above, but viewers themselves are also present on the site. (Other age numbers associated with the title are ages 13+, and ages 15+.)

Reviewing both current and older titles, Common Sense Media offers advice and guidance for over 6,000 movie titles. Somewhat similar to the work of the Film Estimate Board of National Organizations (discussed in chapter 4), the titles reviewed by CSM have been screened in commercial theaters in the United States. (Some titles rated NC-17 by the MPAA are present on the site, but many are skipped over.) By building the reviews for each title around parents and the contextualizing conversations they might consider having with their children, CSM's reviews construct a platform for the responsibilization of

parents and, to a lesser extent, all viewers. This responsibilization is brought out as well in their research agenda, to which I will turn the discussion next.

6.5) Common Sense Media's research agenda

Since 2011, Common Sense Media has maintained a research program, "Program for the Study of Children and Media," which has published eight research briefs to date. CSM presents the mission of this program as aiming, "to provide parents, educators, health organizations, and policymakers with reliable, independent data on children's use of media and technology and the impact it has on their physical, emotional, social, and intellectual development."[235] Most of these briefs are written as reports and rely on literature reviews and large national studies or databases, as opposed to any commissioned original data collection or analysis. They commissioned two studies, "Zero to Eight: Children's Media Use in America," in 2011, and a follow-up study, "Zero to Eight: Children's Media Use in America 2013." The other two original national survey studies include, "Social Media, Social Life: How Teens View Their Digital Lives" (June 2012), and, "Children, Teens, and Entertainment Media: The View From The Classroom" (November 2012). The reports of extant research include, "Children, Teens, Media, and Body Image" (January 2015), "Children, Teens, and Reading" (May 2014), "Advertising to Children and Teens: Current Practices" (January 2014), and "Media and Violence: An Analysis of Current Research" (February 2013).

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[235] https://www.commonsensemedia.org/research (accessed February 3, 2015).

These studies and reports involve youth and their media consumption patterns and habits, tying this to their sense of self and their relationships with others; the perspective of teachers on media as an educational tool; the link between aggressive behavior and violent media consumption; and the intricate relationship between a child's body image and the influence of the media, and their parents. This literature forms the corpus of research material accessible in PDF form by any visitor to the site. Here I will discuss the way in which CSM identifies appropriateness of media, the moral repercussions for viewing inappropriate media, whose responsibility it is to ensure inappropriate media is not wrongly consumed, and the telos underlying this research agenda. As far as the archival records show, FEBNO did not bolster their classification decisions with external knowledge. This offers another contrast to the subject of the previous chapter, the Film Estimate Board of National Organizations (FEBNO), as here the classifiers and raters support their decisions with reports from media experts on how media is thought to influence its viewers.

CSM locates appropriateness by noting the dissonance between on-screen and off-screen images. One example of how they locate appropriateness in their research can be found in a recent study on body image, in their report, "Children, Teens, Media, and Body Image." "Traditional mainstream media ... contain unrealistic, idealized, and stereotypical portrayals of body types," CSM summarizes.[236] This merging of on- and off-screen worlds produces a danger in their mismatch, which CSM continues to link to the consumption of

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[236] https://www.commonsensemedia.org/research/children-teens-media-and-body-image, p16 (accessed February 6, 2015).

media with unrealistic depictions of female waist sizes, a lack of heavier body types. In the few instances where heavier bodies are present, CSM notes an association with negative and unwanted qualities such as unhappiness and unintelligence. While previous conceptualizations of filth were focused on the danger of media and reinforcements of harmful messages by media content, there is instability in how CSM anticipates the identification of appropriateness in media content. Inappropriateness arises for CSM in both the dissonance and the seamless connections between off- and on-screen lives. For example, danger also arises from the similarities of on- and off-screen worlds, not only their mismatch. In the same report CSM cautions, "The digital world is an extension of the offline world, and therefore existing social scripts … help shape the creation of norms in online contexts," going on to highlight the susceptibility of girls to thin-ideal messages around body type.[237]

In the past, censors identified cinematic filth as occurring in those films where on-screen actions, events, and situations would become dangerous should they be transposed to the off-screen world. Many films were labeled problematic and inappropriate, unfit for public screening, distribution, or production altogether. But here, CSM articulates a different relationship between the on- and off-screen worlds. The risk is not that the images on-screen will come to pass in the off-screen world, but that young viewers who have not reached certain developmental milestones will accept such actions as real, thinking such things can and do exist. In this way, the on-screen world is potentially warped, full of questionable morals. When discussing violence, CSM exhibits a tendency to harken

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[237] Ibid.

back to conceptions of filth which threaten contaminating the off-screen world; with other issues like body image CSM adopts a tone that conceptualizes on and off-screen worlds as being in a relationship of appropriateness. Here, images on the screen may plant inappropriate conceptions of reality in the minds of certain viewers, but not exactly come to pass in them (not all people risk being underweight if they watch certain images, the way censors felt specific viewers risked perpetrating crimes if they watched gangster films for example).

Moral repercussion for Common Sense Media is presented in mixed tones of both desirable and undesirable outcomes, yet despite the lip service to desirable outcomes much of their reporting focuses on harmful outcomes over beneficial ones. Continuing with the body image report, the ambiguity of moral repercussion is immediately evident: "Managing one's self-image to an online public can impact one's self-esteem both positively and negatively," they write.[238] Emphasizing the influence on girls, the report cites a negative repercussion by stating, "Media messages emphasizing both a thin ideal and sex appeal can have negative impacts, particularly for girls," and again a few pages later when they write, "Exposure to thin-ideal messages online is associated with girls' negative body image perceptions."[239] This line of reasoning blends into an environmental danger, when CSM reports, "The Internet affords public forums for access to pro-eating disorder communities."[240] CSM extends moral repercussion beyond the immediate content being

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[238] Ibid., p22

[239] Ibid., p17 and 20 respectively.

examined, such as TV shows or movies or what they term traditional media, and links moral repercussion and the support for it to the viewer's surrounding media environment. In this environment, though it is possible that desirable results can come from media consumption, CSM paints a relatively detrimental picture of media consumption and body image.

Another original survey study commissioned by CSM, titled "Children, Teens, and Entertainment Media: The View from the Classroom," focuses on teachers' views on media and student performance. It finds that entertainment media (including TV shows but not movies) has hampered students' attention spans, and given them less patience with uncertainty (as everything is now immediately findable on the internet). This report highlights the way in which moral repercussions for CSM are not tied to a discrete experience, like watching a film, listening to an album, or watching a television program, but is part of an entire mediascape, or media environment – one which is unavoidable and all-encompassing. The images, screens, and attendant messages form a constant and immersive realm, akin to Baudrillard's notion of hyper-reality, in which today's youth dwell (though it is important to note not all youth are accessing the same images with the same frequency or ease). By hyper-reality Baudrillard intends, "a real without origin or reality" (1994: 5). If censors of the past were concerned with the distortion, and in some cases perversion, of reality in the on-screen world, contemporary reviewers are more immersed in a hyper-real realm, though not entirely immersed in it. Everything *is* simulation, yet the simulacra are not exactly hermetic, as in the hyper-real sense intended by Baudrillard.

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[240] Ibid., p20.

There is still concern among CSM reviewers that images and messages, the signs and symbols presented in the mediascape of today's youth, will have some ramification on their personal lived experience and self-perception.

The media environment then brings with it many potentialities, some desirable and others undesirable. Some teachers find media use has helped their students locate information quickly and multi-task better, yet, "Many teachers also think their students' use of entertainment media has had a negative effect on key aspects of their social development."[241] These findings are presented on the same page, in bold typeface, along with an emphasis on the words "find information," "multi-task effectively," and "sexualization." For teachers and students it becomes imperative that a healthy attitude toward this media environment, inescapable as it is, is fostered at an early age. In this sense CSM reviewers and researchers do not understand the simulacra as totally distinct and unrelated to their idea of a lived and tangible reality.
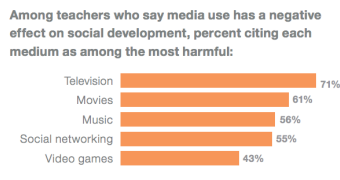
Another example of the totality of the media environment and the mixed outcomes it presents is apparent on the next page of the report. On the left side of the page CSM presents three chunks of information, one bar graph and two quotes from their study, which support the negative impact hypothesis. On the right side, CSM offers two chunks of information supporting the positive impact hypothesis. Here there is no hard data so to speak, but rather two quotations from the survey. The layout of this page is a subtle visual

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[241] Full report accessible at https://www.commonsensemedia.org/research/children-teens-and-entertainment-media-the-view-from-the-classroom, p9 (accessed February 4, 2015).

cue to readers that while the issue of media effects on children is complex and multivalent, the negative impacts outweigh the positive. In this way, CSM tunes the reader in to the worrisome aspects of children's media environment, here presented as exposure to sexual and violent content. Yet if pupils are able to navigate this realm appropriately, they stand to expand their consciousness, awareness, and willingness to engage with other lifestyles and opinions. What decides positive from negative is the unavoidable nature of the media environment, and the stress placed on fostering a healthy relationship to it, or perhaps more accurately, within it.

6.

Among teachers who say their students' social development has been negatively affected by media, the media most often cited as problematic are television, movies, music, social networking, and video games.

Among teachers who say media use has a negative effect on social development, percent citing each medium as among the most harmful:

Television	71%
Movies	61%
Music	56%
Social networking	55%
Video games	43%

"They are listening to music with highly sexualized content at an early age, and viewing the videos made for this music."

Elementary school teacher

"I am very concerned about the violent games that are available to the age group that I teach. There is definitely a social change, especially among the boys."

Fifth grade teacher

7.

Some teachers see a positive effect of media on children's social development.

For every type of social development that was asked about in this survey, teachers were more likely to say that entertainment media have had a negative rather than a positive effect on their students. But 17% do say that their students' media use has a positive effect on their pro-social behaviors. Several teachers commented on how their students' use of media has broadened their horizons by exposing them to diverse viewpoints and experiences.

"The TV shows they watch teach them about others and how to work together."

Elementary school teacher

"Social awareness flourishes with students being aware of worldwide issues through YouTube and Facebook."

Seventh grade history & social studies teacher

Figure 7) Page from original Common Sense Media Research report, "Children, Teens, and Entertainment Media: The View From The Classroom, November 1, 2012.[242]

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[242] Ibid., p10.

On the one hand, many teachers in this survey are reported as finding that their students'

have been harmed by exposure to entertainment media in terms of their attention span,

writing skills, face-to-face communication, completing their homework, and critical

thinking – all of which creates a demand for constant entertainment. Discussing their

findings of critical thinking skills and its relation to entertainment media, CSM reports:

> "A long-time high school teacher said he felt that students are 'getting less and less able to go beyond the information they are getting and think for themselves.' Another pointed out both the positives and negatives, saying he thought new media 'has given them more access to information. But it has hurt them when it comes to digesting this information and knowing what to do with it when they do get it.' And a long-time eighth grade teacher said his students 'have gotten used to pushing a button and getting information that is of moderate value, and then going no further, no deeper into the subject.'"[243]

This is yet another example of the simultaneous valuable and harmful consequences which

CSM attributes to media consumption and exposure. Here, students are able to locate

information but they are not motivated to question the information they find. When read

along with their previous finding that teachers feel students are rushing through their

homework in order to consume entertainment media, the negative consequences are again

subtly linked to outweigh the positive impacts.

Linking repercussions and responsibility, CSM writes in their original survey study, "Zero

to Eight: Children's Media Use in America 2013":

> "Teachers, parents, health providers, and child development experts all agree that the media children use *can have a profound impact – both positive and negative* – on learning, social development, and behavior. The only way to maximize the positive impact of media on children is to have an accurate understanding of the role it plays in their lives: which platforms they are using, the activities or content they are engaging on those platforms, and how their media use patterns vary by age, gender, or socioeconomic status. It is the purpose of this report to provide these data to all of those who are working to improve the quality of children's media, protect children from harmful

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[243] Ibid., p15 (accessed February 4, 2015).

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content, and increase the supply of educational and pro-social content. This group includes policymakers, educators, public health advocates, content creators, and parents themselves" (emphasis added).[244]

The logic of creating better content is reminiscent of attempts by earlier detractors of cinema censorship policies who were still hesitant to embrace cinema altogether, advocating instead for a cleaner body of content, and a cleaner screen. But it also differs in that earlier censors and content controllers were not explicitly concerned with *how* a viewer was consuming a movie, or what their media usage habits were, much less from employing these concepts as ways to sanitize media consumption overall. This is another example of the mixed outcomes of the media environment and the need to be healthy in it. Such a relationship is what drives the research focus at CSM, as they argue without knowing usage patterns in more detail, one cannot increase the positive impact of media consumption. The last sentence in the quote explicates the list of responsible parties for creating and instilling a value for better media content among young viewers. In the body image report, responsibility is discussed by CSM as "Lessons for Intervention," which argues and summarizes with a mixed tone of ambiguous responsibility. Parents need to individualize and fill in for themselves, as "any intervention must recognize cultural values," and, "Body image is multifaceted." Noticeably they include, "existing programs and campaigns have had mixed results," and "social media can be powerful intervention tools."[245] Here CSM shifts immediate attention from the platform to the way in which it is being used, though a certain responsibilization of content creators and industry remains. This negates

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[244] Full report accessible at https://www.commonsensemedia.org/research/zero-to-eight-childrens-media-use-in-america-2013, p7 (accessed February 4, 2015).

[245] https://www.commonsensemedia.org/research/children-teens-media-and-body-image, p24 (accessed February 6, 2015).

responsibility on the part of the platform, and emphasizes responsibility in the way in which it is being used. For CSM, the flow of media cannot be controlled. Because the presence of media in children's lives certainly cannot be unmade, they should be prepared to make their way through it.

Filth, appropriateness, repercussion, and responsibility are flexible categories, employed by Common Sense Media in their research on questions of media effects, consumption patterns, and youth. Appropriateness is located in the spaces of both disagreement and agreement between digital and non-digital realms. The sense of moral repercussion involved in the consumption and exposure of digital media involves both the harmful and the valuable, an interesting merging of constructive and harmful impacts of media consumption built into the discourse of the organization. "This vast digital media landscape can have both a positive and a negative impact on kids' learning and healthy development," Steyer stated.[246] And the location of responsibility advanced by CSM is spread wide, reaching teachers, educators, policy makers, content creators, and ultimately parents. This flexible usage of these analytical categories enables the broader perspective CSM engages in, examining a wide range of media beyond movies and television. Yet much of the thought and sentiment of earlier content classification and ratings organizations is echoed in the work of CSM, suggesting future classification organizations will also continue to conceptualize media with broad brush strokes.

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[246] "Former FCC Chairmen Join Task Force Calling for New Digital Kids Initiative," CSM press release January 24, 2008, available at https://www.commonsensemedia.org/about-us/news/press-releases/former-fcc-chairmen-join-task-force-calling-for-new-digital-kids# (accessed February 2, 2015).

6.6) Common Sense Media and its media telos

How do reviews, and their writers, become credible? How does moral authority take on new qualities and become a resource and an environmental quality, as well as a responsibility? In this chapter, I demonstrated that when reviewers do not use strong language but rather a series of open-ended questions, they are establishing both their own moral authority as well as fortifying a sense of moral authority among individual readers, with an emphasis on parents. Common Sense Media provides parents and visitors to their website with reviews on thousands of media items and types, spanning the range of exposure available to most contemporary digital youth. Throughout the organization's rhetoric, from their presentation of self, their film reviews, original blogs, and research digests, CSM constructs a telos for media which positions it as capable of influencing the common good, should the negative or meretricious elements of it be curtailed, and classified as such.

However, the larger shift from regulation to ratings, censoring for children and younger viewers has acquired a sense of inauthenticity and out datedness. Accordingly, CSM steers clear of any explicit or obvious language of censorship, positioning themselves instead as an organization that advocates for children and consumers' rights rather than any sort of external body judging media morality from a distance. By impressing a diverse array of actors, including child viewers, parents, and platforms, that they are responsible for morally appropriate content, CSM occupies a position between content providers and content consumers. Whereas in the past, moral authority was estimated between content

producers and consumers, CSM focuses its energy on platforms and providers and viewers, wedging their way into a different stopgap position than previous content control efforts discussed in this dissertation. By participating in the creation of safe and sealed off media environments, and engaging in the discourse of moral responsibility for viewership practices by viewers themselves, CSM bridges a new gap between content providers and viewers, responsibilizing both sets of actors and turning moral authority into a resource they both possess and generate among others.

Common Sense Media's approach to media morality strongly resonates with the work of censors, classifiers, and movie raters of the past (as discussed in previous chapters, and will be recapitulated in the conclusion). Media is appreciated by CSM, and has the potential to be educational, motivational, inspirational, and inspiring for young viewers. But without context, discussion, and consciousness, media can also easily create negative experiences, outcomes, and results, not just for individual viewers but for the public good as well. As a result, the language utilized by reviewers and writers for CSM blurs the boundaries between positive and negative, on-screen and off-screen, and ultimately morally acceptable and morally reprehensible. Such blurring and ambiguity creates space for the opinions and perspectives of individuals and families who consult the reviews, tips, and discussion questions offered by CSM. In this sense, moral authority accumulates different qualities and becomes a resource in the larger realm of media morality and appropriate viewership practices of its own. That users may arrive at their own choices creates an aspect of the self-censor within the individual, who, guided through a set of questions, locates their

boundaries and classifies media accordingly, consuming what is defined as acceptable, and avoiding the rest. This implicates the acts of censorship, classification, and rating, all of which are encouraged by the reviews, tips and research reported on by Common Sense Media.

7.1) Reformulating the central question

What does the shift in the moral monitoring of Hollywood content, from regulatory approach to a ratings-based one, reveal about the structure of moral authority in American society? This dissertation argues that in tandem with shifting techniques technique are changes in the way that media-related moral dangers, authority, and responsibility are articulated. In this dissertation, the term ambiguity has been employed to indicate moral ambiguity, a problem presented by all media to anyone who wishes to control their distribution, consumption, and reception. The ultimate argument made here is that as American society changes, as the boundaries around the elite groups disappears, as cultural authority wanes, there is no longer one group that claims the authority to define what is permissible on American screens. The nature of authority has been transformed, along with the shifting foundations of American social structure. When authority is not clearly defined or allocated, the result is ambiguity as in the absence of an enforcer. This can be observed in the current day (see chapter 6 especially), as external ratings organizations, the industry's internal raters, and young and old viewers struggle to delineate their own moral boundaries.

Moral ambiguity, which was once a serious and pervasive danger posed by media to potential, susceptible viewers, has become a resource in the act of its definition, one that many different actors and organizations wish to maintain for a wide variety of reasons.

Though the techniques of monitoring, controlling, and limiting media have changed over the past century of media production, forms of censorship continue to exist. "There are, after all, several ways films get censored these days," wrote one scholarly observer (Lewis 2000: 295). While the responsibility to develop and maintain knowledge about the moral limits of appropriate viewership has become diluted among all viewers and audiences (see chapter 6), in the past such moral authority was articulated and held by industry organizations such as the Production Code Authority (see chapter 2), or the industry-affiliated Film Estimate Board of National Organizations (see chapter 5).

There are several recent, and relevant, examples of debate and criticism over a film, its audience, and the moral danger (often concentrated around themes of sexuality or violence) viewers risk in the act of watching such films. Although the 1997 remake of *Lolita* received an R rating from the industry's Classification and Rating Administration, Hollywood companies were reluctant to distribute the film.[247] It was only when interest from the cable network Showtime was expressed that The Samuel Goldwyn Company purchased the rights for theatrical distribution in the United States. Criticism of the film pointed out the valuable performances by the lead performers, while simultaneously drawing attention to the morally pointed, fatal ending which meets both the pedophile Humbert Humbert and his transgressive teenage attraction, Lolita. "In the end, 'Lolita' is a tragic morality tale and a poignant character study," wrote *The New York Times* reviewer

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[247] The first film version of *Lolita* (1962), directed by Stanley Kubrick, went through several rounds of revisions with the Production Code Authority and was also required to meet the standards of the Legion of Decency. In order to finally receive a seal of approval for theatrical release, all sexuality was at best implied with humor, and no one under 18 years of age was admitted to theaters.

Caryn James.[248] The most recent discussion thread on the film's IMDB.com page poses the

question, "Does the ending mean Humbert was cured of his pedophilia?"[249] A

conversation about whether or not Humbert's continued love for Lolita, after she has aged

out of his usual dating range of girls age 12-14, indicates his love has cured him of his

pedophilia. These concerns echo the approach advocated by organizations like Common

Sense Media, wherein audiences are instructed to question the underlying message of a

film and examine whether it resonates or clashes with their social moral perspective.

Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) also brings to light the question of extreme

violence and the politics of on-screen narratives. Similar to *Lolita*, Gibson also had a

difficult time distributing his film. Early criticism that the film was anti-Semitic, and

Gibson's insistence on the use of the biblical language Aramaic, made the film seem

difficult to attract an audience for. Adding to the difficulty, negative publicity and protests

were stirred up when industry distributors expressed interest in acquiring the rights to the

film. Receiving an R rating from the MPAA, Gibson decided to distribute the film with an

independent distribution company, Newmarket Films, and rely on small-scale TV

campaigns and word-of-mouth among fervent church goers to attrat an audience. This

evangelical grassroots distribution strategy yielded incredible profits, with the film grossing

$611 million in worldwide box office in the year after its release.[250] Gibson was still

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[248] http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9D02E4DB1238F932A05754C0A96E958260 (accessed
August 31, 2015).

[249] http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0119558/board/nest/240541733?ref_=tt_bd_1 (accessed August 31, 2015).

[250] "Coming soon: unrated 'Passion'", in the *Los Angeles Times,* 9 March 2005, article accessible here:
http://articles.latimes.com/2005/mar/09/entertainment/et-passion9 (accessed September 3, 2015).

dismayed at the restrictive rating on his film, and created a second version which had seven

minutes of violent scenes taken out, stating, "By softening some of its more wrenching

aspects, I hope to make my film and its message of love available to a wider audience." The

recut version was still categorized as an R film however, and Gibson and his distributors

eventually decided to release the re-cut version as an un-rated film. "We have to fight the

perception that 'unrated' means more graphic," said Newmarket President Bob Berney,

speaking to the political straights and ultimate control over a film's release and box office

the MPAA retains.[251]

Writing about the violence in the film, the well-known critic Roger Ebert declared, "This is

the most violent film I have ever seen." Thinking further about the violence in the film, he

continued:

> "This is not a criticism but an observation; the film is unsuitable for younger viewers, but works
> powerfully for those who can endure it. The MPAA's R rating is definitive proof that the
> organization either will never give the NC-17 rating for violence alone, or was intimidated by the
> subject matter. If it had been anyone other than Jesus up on that cross, I have a feeling that NC-17
> would have been automatic."[252]

Yet the film continues to enjoy support among Christians of all stripes. Debate continues

over whether the film is appropriate for children, with some expressing shock that

Christian families would even consider showing such a film to children, and others such as

Common Sense Media supporting the film's R-rating, labeling it as appropriate for mature

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[251] Both quotes ibid.

[252] Full review available at: http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/the-passion-of-the-christ-2004 (accessed
August 31, 2015).

teens, as it is both "extremely violent, and powerful."[253] One Common Sense Media

reviewer wrote, "Gibson has said that the agonizing, unbearable torture is a key part of the

story, and parents who are considering whether this movie is appropriate for their children

should see it themselves to judge how their children might respond to it." Providing a

synopsis of the film while highlighting the controversial points of anti-Semitism and

extreme violence levied against it, the reviewer concluded, " Ultimately, each member of

the audience will have to evaluate the movie as a whole as an affirmation of faith or as an

invitation to those who are still searching."[254] This discursive move shifts the cultural

authority and responsibility to make a moral inference and decision about a movie to the

parent viewer, one who has hypothetically come to the review for an answer to just this

question. This discourse also highlights the underlying and larger developments discussed

in this dissertation, wherein ambiguity in a text is transformed from a danger to a resource.

In the case at hand, the question of whether the violence is justifiable or not is ultimately

left to the parent, displacing authority from the cabal of CARA raters to the individual

parent deciding what to allow their children to watch.

The responsibilization of viewers has its roots in earlier attempts to develop film

appreciation techniques among viewers (see the discussion in chapter 4 about the earlier

work of Edgar Dale, and the film appreciation movement), and was anticipated by other

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[253] The IMDB discussion is here (http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0335345/board/thread/246200666), while
the Common Sense Media review can be accessed here: https://www.commonsensemedia.org/movie-
reviews/the-passion-of-the-christ (both links accessed August 31, 2015).

[254] Both quotes ibid.

close observers of media and morality. Decades before the industry abandoned its regulatory approach and adopted its ratings scheme, chief industry moral watchman Joseph Breen wrote in a letter to a young employee of the PCA, "Everybody in America is censor-conscious; and everybody will be a law to himself, finding fault with our decisions. Be prepared for this - keep your chin up - do the best you can - work conscientiously - and let the chips fall where they may."[255] Though Breen was writing to encourage a younger employee some eighty years ago, his warning that viewers were their own moral arbiters can be seen in the instructional methods of Common Sense Media today. What is unique about the work of CSM is that they criticize the industry by tying their work to service providers, sidestepping the traditional theatrical infrastructure. This angle allows CSM to maintain a critical stance toward the industry's ratings, garnering support from parents who are frustrated with the ratings system, while also remaining relevant to the MPAA. They do not openly criticize the MPAA's ratings strategy, but by offering their own independent ratings to service providers, the CSM undercuts some of the cultural authority to rate films that has traditionally been the domain of the MPAA/CARA (and before them, the Production Code Authority).

Speaking about the CARA, scholar Jon Lewis wrote, "In the heat of a ratings controversy, we tend to forget that the true measure of the rating system lies not in its treatment of specific scenes in specific movies but in its maintenance of the larger network of relationships that form the new Hollywood" (2000: 299). Many agree that the effect of

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[255] Breen to Hart, 28 July 1934, *Nell Gwynne* Production Code Authority file, Margaret Herrick Library, Motion Picture Academy of Arts and Sciences.

CARA's work is to further a system that sets prior censorship in motion and operationalizes market exclusion for films that are produced or distributed by studios that are not a part of the clique of Hollywood major studios and their subsidiaries (Waguespack and Sorenson 2011, Covell 2015). Though the politics that are involved in deciding what is dangerous have also shifted, this scholarship has found that films with distributors, producers and directors who are more centrally tied to MPAA member studios receive more lenient ratings than those that are independent or less centrally tied to the organization. In the past, state censors, and thus the industry, were fraught with concerns over media content that depicted childbirth, adultery, criminality, and gun violence. Today's raters are concerned with terrorism, pornography and explicit sexual content, and extreme violence (not considering the exception made for the depiction of violence against Jesus Christ).

Despite the shifting boundaries of what the MPAA considers morally dangerous to whom, the organization continues to maintain a strong hold as gatekeepers to the mainstream theatrical market, and thus continues to influence and shape the boundaries of acceptability and decency in an overwhelming majority of American cinematic narratives. The 2015 box office statistics provided by the industry tracker *Box Office Mojo* reveal that the top six studios maintained control over 85% of the market share.[256] The MPAA's critics continually contend that the organization has evidenced "ratings slides" when it comes to violence, but has maintained its strict limits on sexuality. What passes for sex in

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[256] January 1– August 30, 2015 Studio Market Share, accessible here: http://www.boxofficemojo.com/ studio/ (accessed September 3, 2015).

films today is still shaped by the past, most notably by the specific history of heavy Catholic influence on cinema censorship (see chapter 2 in particular). This lack of sexuality in media is connected to the responsibilization of the industry such Catholic pressure achieved. Regardless of how individual viewers are instructed in the methods of film appreciation techniques, questions of sexuality as a method for gaining self-knowledge are proposed far less often than questioning violence for the same ends.

By examining the methods of content control employed by cultural intermediaries such as censors, regulators, raters, and classifiers, this dissertation examined the shifting parts, processes, and roles involved in morally interpreting and coding a film. In order to thoroughly address this issue over time, this dissertation examined several practices of labeling, classifying, and censoring, focusing on how types and processes of cinematic filth, moral repercussion, responsibilization, and cinematic telos interact with one another. As a result, the ultimate goal of content controllers is rendered comparable. The presence of cinematic filth and moral danger has a formally stable presence, even though it is an empirically unstable category over time and across organizations. By way of elaboration on this observation, I will re-articulate the way in which the analytic framework employed here yielded this observation. I will also offer a summary of the contributions of each chapter, highlight the limitations of this research, and conclude by sketching directions for future examinations of the topic.

7.2) Chapter contributions

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Inspired by the endeavor of analogical thinking, this dissertation crafted four key cases of varying attempts to control and evaluate cinema, arriving at the analytic categories of filth, moral repercussion, responsibility, and telos, while closely reviewing the words and decisions around cinematic narratives and their morality over time. It evidenced the shifting social values embedded in modes of evaluating and apprehending cinema as a medium, a message system, and a moral world, and made clear the shifting structure of cultural authority in morally appropriate viewership practices over time. As a result, it offers a close examination of the beliefs about media effects that lie underneath attempts and actions to control the production, circulation, and consumption of cinema. By considering the morals and politics of media control in the United States from the 1930s to the present, this project forged a conceptualization of censorship that incorporates both explicit and subtle forms of media control. As such, it has uncovered the bases and claims that continue to support certain techniques of controlling media flows, and the ways in which moral ambiguity, once a constant risk, has become a resource for better knowing and identifying one's moral boundaries.

Moving chronologically throughout the past century of cinema censorship and content control measures, this dissertation began with the work of Hollywood's own censorship board, the Production Code Authority (chapter 2). In particular, this chapter asked how the PCA was related to other organizations that were also involved in the morally controlling the production of media content, and how the definitions of responsibility that were implied in the actions they took as an industry organization differed from those

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forged by other censorship organizations. After discussing the PCA's own image in the public eye, the organization's connections and correspondence with other content control organizations was examined, beginning with their relationship to the Catholic clergy and leadership of the early 20th century. In particular, the publishing king Martin Quigley and his stance on enforcing a moral clean up of the industry while boosting its prosperity evidenced the ways in which the Catholic clergy were connected to, yet separate from, the industry. Although it would be an overstatement to characterize the PCA as a blind follower of the Catholic leadership in matters regarding morality, there were many common points in how Catholic pressure groups and the PCA conceptualized the attributes of filth, moral danger, and repercussion for inappropriate viewership. These organizations also shared a sense of how the industry ought to clean up its products, as both were committed to avoiding legislative censorship in favor of the industry cleanings its own screens. The filth and danger of watching movie content was partly the fault of the stereotyped Jewish producer, and it was they who were charged with the moral responsibility of sanitizing the movies and removing the opprobrium that was harming the box office of Hollywood's products. This sense of Jewish domination as a source of filth and danger, tied to the outsider status of Jews in mainstream American culture, positions the category as being easily tied to accusations of sexual perversion and indecency. Such accusations are somewhat weakened in the post-WWII period and the larger shift to pluralism in conceptualizing movie audiences and assigning responsible viewership practices to multiple viewers, and the top executives and managers who run Hollywood are seen as less filthy today than they were in the past. Yet the overarching question of Jewish

influence on American culture still hangs in the air. One does not have to scratch too far beyond the surface to come up with anti-Semitic accusations in the present day, especially of those figures related to media production.

This chapter also discussed the points of intersection between the PCA and the state censorship boards, especially highlighting their amicable relationship with the New York State censors. Though the organizations had many differences, there was also a shared professional ambition in monitoring and maintaining decency in Hollywood films. Both organizations were also aware of the changing tides surrounding their work as the industry moved into the youth revolution of the 1960s. While the PCA did not enjoy this sense of similarity in their end goals with the industry's member studios, I also discussed how the PCA fostered and maintained relationships with the censored. The major difference between these three types of organizations can be found in the analytic category of responsibility: the industry's regulators, as well as the Catholic observers and bureaucratic censors, all pointed their fingers at the studios to clean up their own content, while the studios pointed to audiences, the box office, and the perceived demand for morally questionable material. As the legislative and cultural grounds for censorship eroded in the post-WWII era, the industry slowly began to adopt smaller audience blocks in place of one mass audience, causing shifts in the production and consumption of Hollywood content from a one-size-fits-all approach to niche marketing. Along with this shift came the move from censorship/regulation to ratings, an important move discussed in the last two sections of this chapter (and one which resonates with the later discussions in chapters 5

and 6). The ultimate result of these developments is that responsibility and moral authority, once maintained by a small coterie of moral arbiters, has become pervasive across all ranks of viewers and viewership venues.

Next, I discussed the work of New York State censors, housed in the state's Education Department under the Motion Picture Division (MPD). This chapter (chapter 3) argued notions of risk and harmful effects of cinema consumption are not unique to any particular moment in the arrival and development of cinema, but can be located at many moments in the medium's existence. Chapter 3 traced the analytical categories of filth, moral repercussion, responsibility, and telos in the 1930s, by way of a close examination of the rejection decisions made by the MPD as well as other MPD archival materials. I demonstrated that censors took issue with cinema in defense of two audience images, the virtuous and susceptible audience. The latter is associated with the meretricious effects of cinema consumption, while the former articulates viewers who noticed such potential moral repercussions among other viewers and took offense. The possible beneficial moral repercussions of cinema consumption are noticeably missing from the censors' perspective on cinema, their concerns and censorial decisions being charged with a protective ambition for citizens and society, rather than a constructive one. MPD reviewers perceived a reality in the text, one that needed to be brought in line with the perceived legal reality of the state, other times needing to be tempered so as not to create an impetus for immoral action among the vulnerable populations exposed to such images. Motion pictures needed to conform to this ideal legal reality, as they could unduly influence its viewers' perceived

reality. Those films that do not conform to off-screen, legal realities constitute cinematic

filth, or moral danger. The mismatch between on-screen and off-screen realities was thus

deemed dangerous, requiring censorship as such.

Allotted a certain distance from the public for whom they were censoring films, censors

were able to responsibilize themselves entirely and citizen-viewers very little, if at all. The

central crux of explicitly censoring cinema is the belief that ambiguity in a film – be it

narrative ambiguity or textual ambiguity – is inextricably linked to moral ambiguity in its

effects on an audience. For the MPD's censors, moral ambiguity was a danger, one which

both susceptible and virtuous audiences could be affected by. The work of MPD censors

was aimed at protecting society from the harmful and corrupting outcomes of cinema,

requiring films of films be excised, or a film be banned entirely, in order to do so. This

position stands in stark contrast to the work of other researchers and cultural

intermediaries, as discussed in the following chapters, wherein moral ambiguity took on

the attributes of a resource and shed some of its associations with danger. Encoded in the

rejections for a film are the expectations for moral repercussion, or reaction, to a film,

harbored by censors. I wish to more clearly draw out the relationship between distance

from the public for whom the MPD was censoring cinema, and the analytical categories of

responsibility and responsibilization. The emerging conclusion from chapter 3 is that

distance from viewers results in less clear responsibilization of the audience, or individual

roles within audience images. The moral ambiguous of a film, and thus presented by it,

remain dangers and not resources. This distance is also tied to a somewhat murky

responsibilization of the industry. If moral boundaries are drawn without some aspect of transparency, there is less responsibilization encoded in the work of those drawing the boundaries. In a sense, the more credible and desirable the image on the screen, the more the off-screen world is threatened.

The work of the New York State censors offers many obvious points of distinction with the work of communications and media scholars, and researchers of their time. In chapter 4, I examined the work of early studies on film and communication, focusing on social science scholars associated with the Payne Fund Studies. Similar to censors, scholars understood filth to arise from the mismatch between experience and screen, but these scholars and their output were not as removed and inscrutable from and by the audiences about whom they were speaking. Another major development is that moral ambiguity is coherently and continually articulated as a resource for audiences to identify the appropriate moral boundaries of media for the first time. When moral ambiguity becomes a resource, a dimension of responsibilization is introduced for both content control actors as well as the audiences on whose behalf they are rendering their judgments. Though later raters will continue to develop moral ambiguity as a resource where audiences are expected to have their own individual boundaries, pre-WWII era scholars and film appreciation educators felt there were obvious boundaries which all properly instructed viewers would arrive at. These scholars also responsibilized themselves very little in comparison with censors, being responsible not for making decisions on behalf of audiences but rather guiding audiences toward reflections and decision making positions of their own. This approach to cinema

thus enabled scholars the space necessary for the medium to also have desirable effects on

audiences and society, this being embraced by the work of education scholar Edgar Dale,

but also New York University-based sociologist and educational scholar Frederic Thrasher.

Dale understood filth as the discord between the personal lived experience of an individual

viewer and the actions, scenes, and scenarios on the screen. By suggesting students arrive

at their own conclusions about the quality of a film, this approach directly responsibilized

the viewer to find and know the appropriate moral limits of media. It also potentially

mitigated any harmful repercussions by providing viewers with a working, and defensible,

sense of filth and danger, and a set of tools to help them locate and label filth as such.

This was the beginning of the later development to see ambiguity as a resource for

individual moral boundary construction, though it is important to note that there is still a

sense of moral ambiguity as a danger in the expectation that one set of boundaries should

become obvious to all properly instructed viewers. Not all scholars were equally optimistic

about the role and capability of the audience however, as evidenced by the scholarship of

Chicago sociologist Herbert Blumer. Blumer found the viewers' reflections useful for

identifying the institutional and social arrangements by which audiences were rendered

more likely to be affected by the cinema, but he was not invested in providing audiences

tools for breaking down and identifying the actions and scenes they saw on the screen. For

Blumer, moral ambiguity remained a strict danger, not a resource. Frederic Thrasher's

endeavors to bring film appreciation to community leaders, teachers, and social workers

combined Dale's notion of film as an educational value and ambiguity as a resource with

Blumer's concerns about the relationship individuals had with local institutions and the overall societal benefit of exposure to cinema.

A sense of realism remains linked with the evaluative mechanisms involved in these scholarly stances on cinema, relating it to citizens, consumers and viewers in a way that grants evaluators, or experts, a slight upper hand. Such individuals are in possession of an understanding of realism that is either present or absent from the screen. For scholars, the telos of cinema was centered on the individual and their relationship to external institutions, while remaining dependent on their opinions, experiences, and station in life. This was a pioneering move in the sense that the narrative morality of cinema was not judged solely on the flickering images themselves but also with contextual aspects of the viewers' lives and positions in mind. Audiences were responsibilized with the ability to discern for themselves the moral repercussions of a title, and its moral meaning and message for their own context. Cinema became flexible and fluid in this conceptualization, and audiences became capable viewers who could mold cinematic texts to support or detract from their own situations. The work of cultural intermediaries then was to enable viewers to mold such texts in certain ways over others, via questions, interpretive tools, and education on cinema as a craft, narrative, and product. Filth was determined by the mismatch between an individual's positions and the situations and scenes depicted in a scene, and became localized in a way rendered impossible by the work of censors and censorship. These are important steps in the eventual adoption of ratings over censorship

or regulation, as audiences would be expected to understand and respect the differences between categories and types of movies.

Chapter 5 examines the work of an overlooked but key organization in this larger shift from regulation to ratings, namely the work of the Film Estimate Board of National Organizations (FEBNO). Moral ambiguity in a film, as perceived by FEBNO, was made visible by their unique ability to report on classificatory disagreements. By tracing their categorical disagreements over a title and where it belonged on their age-appropriate spectrum, this chapter demonstrated that the structure and layout of a film affects how its moral messages are interpreted, and how a film is ultimately classified for public consumption. The less support conventional morals received from the comedic performances of characters and scenarios in a film, the more difficult it was for the umbrella organization to unanimously categorize a film. FEBNO noted this ambiguity by labeling some films with multiple categories, flagging readers to take note and arrive at their own decisions based on which organization's perspectives were most closely in line with their own. Here, moral ambiguity begins to take on even more attributes, becoming a resource for readers rather than a danger to be avoided. Such attributes and responsibilities for the audience are key to the eventual shift from regulation to ratings.

Responsibilization and moral repercussion are thus localized even further in instances of moral ambiguity as a resource. New York State censors read FEBNO's reviews, evidencing that content control organizations paid attention to the work of their counter parts in

other streams of thought on cinema and its societal ramifications. Ultimately, a sense of moral authenticity was being developed in the work of FEBNO, wherein readers were allowed, and expected, to make choices based on how and with whom they identified. This development directly stems from the work of Edgar Dale and other film appreciators, as evidenced in the reviewing style and questions FEBNO prompted readers to pose of themselves, their children, and their students when watching a film. Such moral authenticity, affected by allowing and enabling viewers to localize moral repercussion and responsibility for clean cinematic consumption, also forms a link to the work of Common Sense Media, as discussed in chapter 6. Although the markers of identification are even further individualized in the contemporary case than in the work of FEBNO, where religion and profession were more salient features for aligning oneself with an organization's interpretation of a film rather than using moral ambiguity in a film to generate knowledge about one's self. This individualized knowledge becomes even more paramount in the work and discourse of Common Sense Media, where ambiguous films such as *American Sniper* are valued rather than bracketed off as dangerous.

In continuing to ask how an organization inscribes morally imbued characteristics to pieces of media, chapter 6 offered a close examination of the structure of a movie review written by Common Sense Media (CSM), the connections between movie reviews and the organization's blogs, and the research the organization cites and commissions. For CSM, ambiguity is a resource, and reviewers writing for the organization are careful to avoid outright condemnation of films even when they are secure in their opinion they are for

adults only. These spaces of individual decision making, where families and parents are encouraged to know the specific limits and boundaries of their own family, further underline a type of authenticity and legitimacy among parents who assume a more proactive stance regarding their children's media viewing habits. However, CSM's opinions are also inserted between viewers and the screen, creating tension between the organization's two discursive modes, one of viewer self-awareness and the other of moral responsibility of the organization to guide viewers in the right direction. In this sense, CSM shares some similarities with the other content control organizations discussed previously.

The transformation of moral ambiguity as a resource rather than a danger has been developed along with a form of moral authenticity. The morally authentic review creates a link between consumers' personal opinions and the media being consumed. Though steered by the questions and reviews of CSM reviewers and writers, individual parents are encouraged to arrive at their own decisions, empowering them and responsibilizing them in the same breath. Parents are presented with information that directs them toward certain conversations, contextualization, and conclusions of what constitutes filth, the specific moral repercussion of a media object, and the ultimate telos of media consumption. But they are not told explicitly what such conclusions might be. This does not mean CSM harbors no opinion on the appropriate age range for specific titles, or that they do not articulate the context of a film or frame the arguments it raises. But the spotlight placed on the responsibilities of the parent shape and influence the specific

conclusions and allowances each parent will make, investing them in the acts of defining

filth, moral repercussion, and telos in their childrens' consumption patterns. When the

responsibilization of the user or audience for a classification system is prioritized, the

identities of those working for the ratings organization are more transparent, as are the

ratings schema and approaches employed by the organization. Greater responsibility of the

viewer correlates with more transparency and less rigid definitions of filth and danger,

moral repercussion, and the overall purpose of media consumption.

Ultimately for CSM, the telos of proper media consumption is to enable and foster the

public good. This presents a neat comparison with the work of New York State censors for

whom the consumption of media was not a nurturing of the public good, but at best a

neutral effect on it. The endeavor of their work was to protect the public good, rather than

enable members of the public to reflect and make wise decisions for themselves and their

families. In this conceptualization, individual viewers were not capable of being

responsibilized, and the harmful repercussions of cinema were a constant element of the

medium. By contrast, CSM positions viewers as constantly responsible, with a range of

outcomes for media consumption. In this way CSM creates a media telos where

consumption always influences the common good, either harming it or helping it. By

identifying those items that are harmful, or morally dangerous, consumption can create

better citizens for tomorrow. For CSM, when consumed the right way, media also provides

a realm of benefits and education to viewers. Embedded in this "right" way is an

understanding of the family as a unit. For example, while CSM does not shy away from

reviewing material that represents, deals with, or discusses issues within the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered communities, most material is cautiously reviewed, with a constant emphasis on contextualizing the analogies between homosexual relationships and heterosexual relationships. Without such contextualization, media can veer toward the negative, for both individual families and the public good. The boundaries are sketched out by CSM, but ultimately filled in by individual parents and families. This specific form of responsibilization creates a sense of moral authenticity, but also creates and reinforces the self-censor. Where in the past, films were seen as interfering with an audience, today discussion of a film's messages and meaning is supposed to help audiences know themselves.

7.3) Limitations of this project

Despite the wide chronological and empirical span of this dissertation, there are a few limitations that are worth mentioning. First and foremost, this dissertation is limited to empirical cases set in the United States. Unfortunately this leaves out much discussion both from the past and the present about how to deal with exporting American films to other countries, an issue in both the days of William Hays at the Production Code in the late 1920s, and in the contemporary world as well. As a result, discussions over whether or not foreign censors, such as Chinese state officials, have an influence on American productions is an important topic area this dissertation cannot address.[257] The censorship or shaping of American films to meet expectations of foreign agencies and bodies is not

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[257] For example, recent conversations have been had around the editing of American films to meet Chinese censorship requirements. The recent Sony hack (2014) has also drawn attention to questions of "cultural sovereignty."

unique to the present day. The Hollywood trade organization, the Motion Picture

Association of America, worried in its earliest days of existence about appeasing foreign

consulates when exporting films abroad, creating guidelines in the Production Code that

safeguarded against portraying certain races and ethnicities in certain ways. Thus, this

limitation does not allow for comparative work between the American context and other

instances of cinema classification and censorship. But perhaps this is an avenue for future

work.

The second limitation of this project is that it is only focuses on Hollywood narrative film

productions, leaving out issues of documentary films and other non-fiction formats. Non-

fiction films such as documentary newsreels were noticeably exempt from certain

censorship and production code requirements as early as the 1930s. The question of why

and how nonfiction mediums are considered to be separate is beyond the scope of this

dissertation, but worthwhile from both a theoretical and philosophical point of view. Is it

that the realm of "reality" is afforded less negative moral repercussion than narrative or

fiction films? What about propaganda, and the war machine of the 1940s? The U.S.

Government was aware of the value of film, and turned to it to ramp up the cause for the

war, most famously in the "Why We Fight" documentaries commissioned by the

government to ramp up support for the Second World War. By looking only at

Hollywood productions, the analytical framework of this dissertation is unable to

contribute to understandings of how filth, moral repercussion, responsibility, and telos

play out in the realm of nonfiction film.

Thirdly, this dissertation has been curtailed by minimal engagement with the texture of cinematic objects themselves – with the narratives, story structures, characters, scenes and situations, scenarios, and plots of the movies being censored, classified, rated, and reviewed. How these limitations can feed into and direct future work will be discussed next.

7.4) Directions for future work

Perhaps the screen is best understood as equal parts fiction and reality. Actions taken on-screen are often judged off-screen, and observers, critics, and viewers are continually drawing links or points of divergence as the case may be, between the off-screen lives of actors, directors, writers, and producers. One avenue for further research is to remain in the present day and analyze instances where the off-screen lives and actions of content creators are compared with the value of their media products. Do such instances as the judgments and accusations of Woody Allen's alleged sexual relations with his adoptive daughter, or the condemnation of Lena Dunham's work as exclusively focused on the experiences of upper-middle class young white women offer an example of reverse moral repercussion, whereby the lives of content creators is tied to the worth of the content they create? This avenue could also take a comparative historical bend, examining the points of comparison and contrast with examples such as the notorious off-screen lives of Fatty Arbuckle, or Mae West, and the evaluative judgments passed on their on-screen performances.

Another avenue of future research would be to examine censorship of other forms of media, as well as cinema. Controversies over the arrest of journalists in war-torn and politically fragile situations are potentially important sites of other ways of understanding censorship. Similar to the issue of censorship in journalism, embodied in the blunt method of arresting and thus muzzling journalists, is the question of the blurred line between editing and censorship in international book publishing. American writers whose works have been translated for the mainstream Chinese market are an instance wherein such questions have been raised, and could form an interesting empirical site in which the analytical framework advanced here could be developed further.

As mentioned above, future research could also benefit from examining not only entertainment or narrative film, but also forms of non-fiction filmmaking. How are narrative reality and its attendant forms of morality constructed differently in documentary film, and what do such differences say about registers of viewing and expectations for media literacy among audiences? And, also mentioned above, expanding this research to examine instances of cinema censorship in other countries is an obviously valuable avenue for further refining the analytical categories advanced here.

 All of these avenues for further research would enable the analytical categories of filth, moral repercussion, responsibilization and telos to comment on other empirical sites, other forms of media, and non-American examples. These avenues would expand this research

to comment on debates in neighboring fields, such as media and cinema studies, cultural studies, history, communications, and philosophy. This dissertation has addressed the question of how, over time, Hollywood films were inscribed with a certain sense of morality by cultural intermediaries and content control actors, such as censors, classifiers, and reviewers, but future research is by no means confined to such empirical examples.

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