From Fallen Women to Risen Heroines: Representations of Gender and Sexuality in American Film, 1929-1942

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the film industry and a selection of women’s films from the fallen woman and screwball comedy genres during the “Golden Age” of motion pictures, as they became the most popular form of entertainment. It explores the connection between cultural production and economic expediency, and how these issues relate to notions of appropriate gender activity. There was a markedly conservative shift in the representation of women in Hollywood films of the 1930s spurred by outside pressure upon the industry. This project argues that such could not have happened at any other time because of the unique nexus of events occurring during the Depression. A document known as the Production Code, which was the set of rules and regulations that defined the boundaries of acceptable film content and message, its changes, and the men who shaped and implemented it, serves as the framework for this study.
DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to my mother; she is the strongest, most persevering person I know. Without her presence, motivation, humor, and wisdom, I never could have made it through all those long days and late nights. She is my inspiration and my rock, my reminder that every day is a new opportunity to enjoy and to grow. Her unconditional patience, support, and love have shaped who I am and have shown me that a woman can single-handedly make a difference in the world.
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Thank you to my family and friends who encouraged me every step of the way. They put up with me when I disappeared for days and weeks into the 1930s. They know these movies as well as I do now, whether they wanted to or not. Thank you to Nate Bowe, I used the force as best I could. Chief, may the hour of power live on.

And finally, special thanks to my mother, Sam, and Jenny, we did it.
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INTRODUCTION

The woman who doesn’t want to make a home is undermining our nation.

--Mrs. Thomas A. Edison

“Sex sells” is a commonly heard aphorism, and perhaps no popular culture industry epitomizes the phrase more than that of motion pictures. While this alleged truism is often evoked lightly, what it suggests is an intimate link between economics and sexuality, meaning in this case, how expectations about the idealized visions of men and more pronouncedly, women exist interrelated to financial motive. Interestingly, before the strongly propagandized move to place women back into their “proper” domestic sphere in the 1950s after a liberating experience in World War II, a similar cycle had already occurred. Earlier in Twentieth Century American history similar sentiments expressed a general mood of threatened patriarchy—when the era of Victorian purity had supposedly been thrown out by the free-spirited will of the flapper, the iconographic “new woman” of the Jazz Age. While we now know that women have always been active shapers of history in all walks of life, and had long been expanding their activities outside the home, at the beginning of the 1930s American society struggled with the idea that everyday, working-class women might also leave their domestic duties and invade the public sphere of men. Relative to this trend, in the mid- to late-1930s, popular culture and the entertainment industry undertook a dramatic departure from the

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threatening sexual freedom of the roaring Twenties to reign in representations of women that had been defying gender norms in increasingly bold ways. Nowhere was that more apparent than in Hollywood and embodied by none other than the female stars.

This project grew out of a curiosity about the connection between cultural production and economic expediency, and how these issues relate to notions of appropriate gender activity. This thesis addresses the question of whether the regulation of motion pictures mirrored society or vice versa. Or in other words, upon considering issues of gender in society and film, do films dictate social attitudes or do film audiences? In actuality, this dichotomy is oversimplified. It was not a unified “audience” that influenced film content, but instead a strongly organized, reform-minded part of society which in a self-appointed way attempted to speak for the whole. The results were unmistakable. Indeed, no other period more dramatically highlights this complex relationship of ideals between production and consumption during the last century than the Great Depression, during which time the economy was at its worst, and Hollywood was most susceptible to the ebb and tide of consumer expectations and pressure tactics. No less than the nation’s entire collective identity was at stake. The longstanding cultural myths that structured our national consciousness could no longer sustain the growing numbers of people in need of jobs and something in which to believe. The myth of the successful self-made man was shattered. No longer did people believe that all they had to do was pull themselves up by the bootstraps, and what mythos was to fill the void was up for grabs. This development caused men and sometimes women of influence to have a wholly new respect for the potential power of popular entertainment, especially its fastest growing medium, the motion picture.
Another consideration for looking at entertainment is the fact that scholarship addressing cultural trends has often been eclipsed by emphases on social, political, and strictly economic issues and developments in most Depression era histories. President Hoover’s attempts to let the invisible hand of the market calibrate the economy saw the nation’s fortunes spiral downward; his policies became out of touch with the country’s “forgotten men.” On the heels of this emerged the optimism and morale-boosting administrations of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Addressing the forgotten men and women, President Roosevelt and the social, political, and economic developments under his watch became focal points of scholarship both then and now. His unprecedented interaction with Congress, the bank holiday, the New Deal times two, and the institution of numerous government agencies and programs have long been keystones of Depression era history.

One the other hand, even in the midst of such trying times—when wages were lowest and unemployment highest, roughly three quarters of the population still attended movies weekly.2 While some hailed them and others vilified them, motion pictures were the most popular form of amusement; they were not only around during the Depression, but quite important to many Americans. With issues such as these in mind, this thesis extends to the years immediately before and after this short period to better understand what it was that Americans were watching. It also examines how and why the motion picture industry during the studio era reflected not that “sex sells”, but instead that when

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2 With a population at 123,188,000 during the Thirties, 90 million reportedly attended movies on a weekly basis. Lois Gordon and Alan Gordon, eds., American Chronicle: Year by Year Through the Twentieth Century (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999): 284.
vocal critics demand otherwise, the pictures could still sell themselves without it; or, around it.

Critics, film reviewers and writers were aware of film “dirt” and the increasingly vocal censorship debates during the Thirties. Debates began, albeit with less force, as early as the turn of the century; the images and messages about what happens between men and women was on many a mind, both young and old. “Sinful Girls Lead in 1931,” was the title of an article in *Variety* magazine in December of that year. Ruth Morris, the author of the article, wrote, “The Great God Public, formerly considered a Puritan censor, voiced its approval with admission fees that fully endorsed heroines of easy virtue… Public tastes switched to glamorous, shameful ladies…”3 Three years later, such stories flipped into a one hundred-eighty degree spin. The provocative characters of Clara Bow, Mae West, Greta Garbo, and Marlene Dietrich became scandalous and controversial. As a result of the controversies, by the mid- 1930s, Hollywood promoted another type of female protagonist that audiences equally came to adore. While the melodramatic roles of prostitutes and “kept women” continued to exist, their popularity in fallen woman films gave way to a wholly different film genre in which comedic and seemingly self-assured, yet hopelessly naïve heroines, played by women such as Carole Lombard, Katherine Hepburn, Claudette Colbert, and Irene Dunne, took center stage. The new protagonists, too pure and sheltered to have imagined anything such as their predecessors might have brazenly said or done, became the iconographic women of a subtler type of film aimed at female audiences.

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The contrast stems from variations in the role of censorship and contemporaneous interpretations of the motion picture industry’s efforts at self-regulation through a document known as the Production Code, which is the set of rules and regulations that defined the boundaries of acceptable film content and message. The Production Code, its changes and the men who shaped and implemented it serve as the framework for this study. The Code reveals that motion pictures were indeed threatening to traditional views of morality and there was a conservative shift in the representation of gender and sexuality in American film in the Thirties. Analysis of the Code and a selection of films produced during the 1930s and into the early 1940s reveal the shifting definitions of appropriate representation- of gender roles and female sexuality in the production of women’s films. Moreover, understanding the developments surrounding the Code and the ways that specific films redefined popular film cycles and genres suggests two important points. First, the conservative shift was a successful one in terms of controlled female images and salvaged economic stability; and second, it succeeded in large part due to the particular nexus of events occurring during the Depression within the industry and within the groups who sought to regulate how the industry impacted society through its own powerful brand of mass cultural communication.

In studying the ways that motion picture entertainment changed, it is useful to keep in mind the changes occurring more generally throughout the country. Part of the overarching challenge to gender roles during the Depression and a factor in provoking a backlash of conservative expectations for women in the public eye was the changing nature of family relations under financial distress and the specific social circumstances for women at its onset. Increasing numbers of men lost jobs and women entering the
work force sent shockwaves through homes across the country, undermining the masculine role of the husband and father as breadwinner. Despite the reality that the jobs taken by women had little to do with those sought out by men, that “pink collar” jobs became more tenable than men’s jobs as they paid less, and that women’s job security was less stable, prevailing attitudes urged that women should stay in the home now more than ever. Another inconsistency developed at this time involved the marital status of working women. Traditionally, job-holding women were predominantly single, but during the Depression the number of married women in the work force comprised the highest number of new entrants. These developments created scapegoats out of all working women for unemployed men seeking to understand their perceived loss of worth. Domestic violence against women increased as working women came home to bitter husbands. Ironically, women’s employment was less stable, and unemployment higher. The government did nothing to allay these fears. Legislation on state and federal levels discouraged married women’s employment. Section 213 of the Economy Act mandated that married women were to be the first employees laid off in times of need. During the 1930-1931 year, “a survey of 1,500 cities found that three-quarters of cities did not employ married women.”

More importantly, the pronounced and expanded roles of women, particularly wives and mothers, sparked antagonism aimed at women defying appropriate standards of domesticity. Theresa Amott and Julie Matthaei reveal that even though these women

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had little choice but to take sex-stereotyped jobs such as domestic service, clerical work, and some factory jobs, public opinion was strongly against their entry to any job: “a Gallup poll in 1936 found that 82 percent of Americans opposed the employment of married women.”

Out of necessity came opportunity for women to challenge gender roles that relegated women to the home, but it provoked public outrage. If women entered the public realm of men, they would neglect their duties as housemothers. There would be no one to take care of the home and children. Beyond encroaching upon the duties and roles of men, part of what triggered a crisis in gender expectations during the Depression was that the women’s exodus from their domestic duties threatened the nuclear family.

This issue of the welfare of children plays a significant role in how attention paid to the roles of women translated into an issue of morality. In addition to the wider exposure of the world corrupting the purity and sanctity of womanhood, according to the critics, children left to their own devices and with no supervision could not develop a sound grasp of the difference between right and wrong, good and evil. During the Thirties, social science was introduced as a means by which to understand acculturation. This new trend in research was not without flaw, but was well-suited to espouse the objectives of reformers. As Robert Sklar suggests, it “may have been no less subjective, opinionated and classbound” than methods offered by the literary criticism of traditional cultural elites of the early Twenties and before, but “their aura of modest self-confidence, precision and careful procedure seemed to offer a clarity and persuasiveness that all

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competing forms of social explanation lacked.”7 Once social scientists turned their focus toward the movies, religious and reform groups had material ammunition with which organize their offensive. Studies such as the Payne Fund research series, which will be discussed in Chapter Two, addressed film content and its effects on children and adolescents, providing the much needed proof that it was a threat on multiple levels if female characters and the actresses who brought them to life became role models, who promoted immoral worldviews and participated in wrongful conduct.

Amidst this backdrop, the heightened and highly publicized concern over the moral state of the country caused by economic crises comparably asserted itself upon the entertainment industry, also in danger of going into the red. One author suggests the Production Code was born of the worries fostered by citizens aware of the “precarious state of social cohesion.”8 In other words, the crisis of gender expectations provided impetus to the development of the Production Code and, as the decade wore on, spurred increasingly insistent fervor to ensure its successful implementation. This is not to say that censors solely focused upon promoting a conservative modification of women’s representation and sexuality. It was but one item on a long list of topics upon which censorship and self-regulation cracked down in the movie industry. The representation of criminality in gangster films, for example, was another area that received increased attention and control. Nonetheless, clergymen and Catholic laymen placed issues of gender and gender roles high on the list of issues Hollywood studios needed to address

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more responsibly. The Production Code became a method to control the content and, more importantly, the message of motion pictures in order for the business to survive. Analysis of the historical context of the Code, the films themselves and the controversies surrounding their production reveal that rather than existing as an ineffective form of control at the start of the decade, the Production Code was a flexible, broad set of guidelines modified and interpreted with varying emphases over time.

This research is based upon the theoretical approach that the social context which dictated the representation of women in Depression era films can best be studied from a thematic stance. In studying the historical link between film and culture, this thesis addresses two significant issues: self-censorship and the representation of gender and sexuality through women’s roles in film. To explore these themes and the idea that film is indeed one way to examine cultural trends over time, it is essential to outline approaches scholars have used to analyze the relationship between the movie industry in the United States and American society of the 1930s. Interpretational paths split during the 1970s and 1980s along lines demarcated by frame of reference between cultural historians and feminist film critics and historians over the issues of who or what processes were responsible for the impact of movies on audience responses (or, which public responses impacted the movies), and then converged in the 1990s as multidisciplinary scholars synthesized a range of perspectives and approaches to focus on more specific themes.

Cultural historians provide useful examples of how to present the chronological, historical context that surrounds movie production and reception through a broad narrative approach. These scholars focus upon the movie industry itself as a way of
recounting how the Depression influenced and changed American cinema, particularly due to the extreme cycles of prosperity and poverty Hollywood endured. Robert Sklar’s *Movie-Made America*, originally published in 1975, was one of the first historical treatments of the industry and continues to be a significant cultural study of American film, written with the intention of focusing on “motion pictures in their largest sense, as a mass medium of cultural communication.”⁹ Sklar’s work coupled with Garth Jowett’s *Film: The Democratic Art*, which was written one year later and provided a social historical approach by analyzing statistical data and empirical evidence to draw conclusions about the effect of movies upon society, represents the scholarship responsible for setting in motion a wave of cultural histories that expanded, refined, and refuted their interpretations.¹⁰ By drawing attention to the cultural impact of cinema, Sklar and Jowett were the forebears to perspectives of film history that enhanced otherwise strictly technical, aesthetic film criticism to understand the social context of the cinematic experience.

These scholars also set a precedent for studying censorship, interpreting the move to self-regulate as an indication of the close relationship between movie content and the bottom line studios faced as business enterprises. Jowett weighed the fall and rise of Hollywood’s monetary success against the implementation of popular will in terms of appropriate film content, but particularly in terms of Sklar’s work, the new cultural history of film remains illustrative of the industry’s power over a society unsure of how best, if at all, to implement social controls coming out of an age of burgeoning industrial

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and commercial growth. Sklar argues that “the industry became more enmeshed in the struggles over power and purpose in American society than ever before.”\textsuperscript{11} Likewise, Tino Balio argued the decade of the Thirties was a period in which major studios squeezed small entrepreneurs and family owned theaters out of the industry by using internal, self-regulated censorship as a way to solidify an oligopoly, becoming a thriving “modern business enterprise.”\textsuperscript{12} Cultural film historians agreed that the Depression impacted the movie industry as fully as it did the country in general, but again, most focused upon economics and class-consciousness and not gender.

Also in the 1970s, first in Europe and then within the United States, groups of feminist historians and film critics began to hold film festivals and conferences highlighting what they saw as glaring omissions of the contributions of women both on and off the screen in terms of the development of the movie industry itself and the scholarly treatments of such. Feminist film theory emerged to fill in the gaps and provide a new perspective on the role of cinema in U.S. history- to highlight specific focal points, such as the analysis of gender representation, that were glossed over in broad cultural narratives. \textit{Popcorn Venus: Women, Movies and the American Dream} by Marjorie Rosen and \textit{From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies} by Molly Haskell were among the first to utilize sociological approaches for the development of theories about the role of women in the industry and the meanings behind representations of

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female characters on the screen.\textsuperscript{13} Shortly thereafter and strongly influenced by the women’s movements of their time, feminist film critics began to draw upon semiotics, poststructuralists, and psychoanalytic theory to expose the marginalized positions of women in film.

Within this scholarship, one of the most influential and widely contested works that sought to break from the tradition of cultural historians that paid little attention to the significance of women in film is an article by Laura Mulvey, entitled “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” She interpreted the film industry and the movies it created as a misogynist, voyeuristic experience controlled by men from both the production and consumption perspectives.\textsuperscript{14} While considerably influenced by their contemporary political climates, women such as Mulvey nonetheless uncovered new information previously unknown about women’s contributions to film and ignited debate in film history that continues into the present about the complexities of interplay between gender representation in fictional film and gender prescriptions in society.

Feminist film scholarship broadened its scope during the 1980s, but still relied heavily on psychosocial assumptions that lacked supporting evidence. E. Ann Kaplan’s \textit{Women & Film: Both Sides of the Camera} did acknowledge the need to expand theoretical premises on the representation of women.\textsuperscript{15} She acceded that certain methodological tensions had arisen, namely, that analysis of the male gaze aimed at objectifying women had increasingly become ahistorical by focusing upon the trend of


\textsuperscript{15} E. Ann Kaplan, \textit{Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera} (New York: Methuen, 1983).
power relations and female marginality regardless of specific time frame. Nonetheless, the gap between feminist film criticism and cultural history had not yet been acknowledged in any proactive or large-scale manner. Mulvey, in a collection of her works in 1989 that included her seminal article, acknowledged that her earlier work was written for the immediate interests of the burgeoning Women’s Movement of the 1970s. She suggested that such polemical writing should be considered “stepping stones” to the more comprehensive feminist theory which had carved out its own intellectual space as a legitimate school of thought.¹⁶

A more recent trend has developed in which feminist scholars compile the works of film study which address the false synthesis of general “womanhood” in terms of representation as this universal concept does not adequately examine issues of ethnicity and race.¹⁷ While this trend parallels that of women’s history (with heightened observance of marginalized women), the issue of methodology remains problematic. Much of feminist film criticism continues to approach films in a largely ahistorical sense, asserting interpretation about overarching patriarchal structures at the disregard of historical accuracy in terms of shifting realities in social views of appropriate femininity and masculinity, however subtle they may be.

Multidisciplinary scholars represent a third type of approach to film studies which has developed within the last twenty years. Largely influenced by the broad, cultural interpretation of cultural historians like Sklar, but narrower in focus- to specific aspects


of the industry and the movies it produces—this group provides examples of a more recent
trend in critical methodology. These scholars examine newly available studio archives
and censorship files from the Depression era to analyze more specialized themes by
taking into consideration a range of perspectives and approaches to film scholarship.

Several important books have been published that focus upon self-regulation and
censorship during various periods up through 1966, when the current ratings system went
into effect. Gregory D. Black’s, *Hollywood Censored* is an excellent secondary source
that examines the socio-cultural landscape responsible for the Production Code and the
Legion of Decency’s self-appointed task of influencing the moral boundaries of film
content. Lea Jacobs provides another book length treatment that delves into the case
files of the Production Code Administration to uncover the fault lines of appropriate
content and message. Andrew Sarris and Thomas Schatz use the archives to interpret
cinema through the lens of genre and auteur theories. Sarris views studio success through
genres, emphasizing these broad organizational formulas for movies as a way to shape
film history. Thomas Schatz provides a look at how auteurism shapes theories of film
history, arguing that the role of directors dominates studies of the studio era perhaps more
that any other because author-artists (directors) garnered influence during this period

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18 Sklar’s work was revised and updated in 1994, and is still widely cited in the scholarship of film historians. As a broad narrative, it provides a starting point from which more specific scholarship stems.


more so than at any other time.\textsuperscript{22} It is a significant argument as it provides an insightful corollary to the many interpretations which see the 1930s as a sort of make-or-break moment in the history of film that, as Hollywood ended up on the side of making it, established the movie industry as a business which had shrewdly negotiated its way out of the threat of extinction.

In efforts to understand how the industry and its films changed during the Thirties, some authors now suggest that rather than existing as a reflection of popular culture, Hollywood influenced public sentiment and ideals. They argue that the entertainment industry created its own addendum to the New Deal. Ralph A. Brauer and Giuliana Muscio take this stance. In his article, “When the Lights Went Out- Hollywood, the Depression, and the Thirties,” Brauer interprets the role of Hollywood’s movies during the thirties as part of a “popular New Deal” that coincided with the governmental New Deal. He suggests that rather than solely providing a medium for escape, motion pictures provided a means to vicariously experience aspects of life desired or lost.\textsuperscript{23} Muscio’s \textit{Hollywood’s New Deal} provides a book length treatment that elaborates upon the idea that the movie industry in essence espoused goals that became cultural corollaries to the economic policies enacted by the Roosevelt administration designed to boost morale and the economy to bring the United States out of the Depression.\textsuperscript{24} Lower-


cost tickets, double features, lotteries, and prize give-aways were all utilized in efforts to keep audiences happily in the theaters.

The trend in current scholarship synthesizes previous film studies. In tandem to outlining the social context within which the movie industry operated, scholarship from the late 1990s to the present also takes into consideration a host of critical methodological approaches to film scholarship. A useful secondary source structured by multiple frames of reference to better assess the connection between film and culture is the Ph. D. dissertation of Victoria Sturtevant, “Domestic Disorder: Women in American Film Comedy, 1930-1940.” Her interpretation addresses specific films through the lens of “simultaneous analyses of narrative structure, visual structure, genre, star texts, and production histories.”25 While she specifically focuses upon a group of comedienne from different types of Depression-era comedies, her theoretical and methodological approaches offer a constructive example of how to apply multifaceted perspectives to the production and reception of specific films illustrative of the power struggles occurring between Hollywood, special interest groups, the government, and the economic climate created by the Depression.

Taken together, these scholars illustrate approaches to historical film study that are vital to researching the social context of American film and the film industry during the Depression. They provide a base from which this thesis redirects focal points on issues within broad histories of the interaction between social structures and cinema. The result is an examination of how mainstream society’s gender expectations become social prescriptions in film. Influenced by the methodology of cultural historians and the focus

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upon gender of feminist film historians, this project expands upon the work of multidisciplinary scholars to examine the evolution of the motion picture Production Code as the social context to frame an analysis of selected women’s films. By utilizing the theoretical approach of current historians, the research focuses on the specific topic of gender representation to analyze one of the ways in which the shifting characteristics of social attitudes affected how the studio system adapted to the Depression.

The above stated developments in the historiography of film studies have created an increasingly significant area within the scholarship of social and cultural history. Interest in the golden age of movies in the United States- the rise of Hollywood’s studio era during the 1930s- continues to spark interest as a time of unprecedented change and establishment in what was still a new addition to the entertainment industry. However, most historical scholarship of this period focuses upon the issue of class-consciousness; most feminist scholarship focuses upon the significance of the female as a symbol of male domination. Modern historians have begun to address the motion picture industry in historical scholarship, which has opened up new space for the study of the social context of films.

One opportunity for new interpretation that builds a bridge between feminist film theory and Depression-era history lies in understanding the ways in which events of the Depression shaped contemporary perceptions of appropriate gender roles and acceptable sexuality. An important illustration of this unfolds in the changes affected in Hollywood from 1929 to 1942, in terms of the industry itself and the movies it created. The limits of what could and could not be shown on the silver screen took a deliberately conservative
turn at the same time in which American society experienced the nadir of the nation’s economic predicament.

My argument is that movies changed and regulations responded to the views of a mobilized reform-oriented sector of society, which sought to redefine the lines of gender distinction blurred by the larger cultural upheavals occurring both within the nation and in the world. There was a markedly conservative shift in the representation of women in Hollywood films of the Studio era that was spurred by outside pressure from interest groups, indicating that certain types of audiences did indeed influence production. This could not have happened at any other time because of the unique culmination of events occurring during the Depression.

First, conflicting issues were at play: just as the motion picture industry began to flourish, the country’s economy took a severe turn for the worst. Second, in addition to the general economic malaise throughout the country, the emergence of the studio system and the introduction of sound created an overextended industry vulnerable to external economic pressure applied by investors and consumers. Finally, it was on the heels of the sexual revolution of the twenties in which sensitivity to controversial representation of women was heightened as there was a general conservative reaction to the Depression throughout the greater society in respect to more issues than just sexuality. An examination of the nature of the Motion Picture Production Code in this context and the movies that the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) approved before and after the pivotal year of 1934 illustrates this shift in dominant views of gender appropriate activity during the Depression, and Hollywood played a significant
role in creating and transmitting the boundaries of that shift to the public through corresponding conservative changes in the representation of women.

Chapter One is divided into two sections. The first section traces the development of the motion picture Production Code of 1930. The Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America’s (MPPDA) goal was to improve relations between state censors and film producers through in house control. The Code was developed by this industry-wide organization popularly known as the Hays Office (in reference to its director, Will H. Hays) in a series of incremental steps. It outlined moral guidelines to which studios theoretically adhered in producing films. The Studio Relations Committee of the MPPDA was formed to facilitate negotiations between executives, producers, civic and religious critics, and government censorship boards. It was an extremely daunting task and despite these early efforts, specific films continued production with the approval of the MPPDA, but still provoked the ire of religious organizations and reform groups. The discrepancy existed in the space left for judgment calls on the part of producers, directors, and writers as to what favorable treatment of vice entailed.

The second section looks at a sample of movies that the MPPDA approved in the beginning of the thirties (before 1934). The women’s films; films produced with female audiences in mind, produced in the first four years after the establishment of the 1930 Production Code illustrate the unresolved controversy over the representation of women and sexuality predominantly through stories about “kept women.” The films Madam Satan (1930), Possessed (1931), and Baby Face (1933) represent a group of melodramas known as fallen woman films that pushed the limits of acceptable content. Also analyzed are a group of Mae West comedies, which put a tongue-in-cheek spin on the “sex
picture.” Due to West’s well known proclivity to seductive roles, *Night after Night* (1932), *She Done Him Wrong* (1933), and *I’m No Angel* (1933) were produced during the early years of the Code by Paramount and benefited from the studio’s willingness to push the boundaries of decency as she was wildly popular and the studio heads saw economic expediency in leaving her work unaltered. Both groups of films highlight the moral fault lines of views on acceptable femininity both in film and society.

Chapter Two begins by assessing the enhanced enforcement of the Code in 1934. MPPDA administrators understood that the necessary changes need not come from alterations of the Code itself, but from finding ways to prevent producers from committing what they saw as violations of it. Combined with increased financial strain upon the studios, the situation was one in which producers saw little risk in stretching the limits of “decency” for a chance to sell more tickets. The ethical gamble was a well known development. Several important events occurred in reaction that altered movie production for the remainder of the decade. The Legion of Decency, a powerful Catholic organization, began a boycotting campaign against indecent films, tipping the scales of public opinion as far as the studios were concerned, convincing producers that large enough audiences wanted cleaner pictures. The voluntary studio collaboration with the Studio Relations Committee was replaced with mandatory inclusion in the early stages of production of its successor, the Production Code Administration. Lastly, the new administration implemented a $25,000 penalty for violations of the revitalized Code procedures.

The second chapter then analyzes a selection of films produced under the ratified regulations. As the Production Code Administration tightened its grip on movie content
from 1934 on, producers developed an alternate means of evading the censors by juxtaposing inference to sex with slapstick humor rather than brazen sexuality in gritty drama or bawdy satire, as was permissible before. Unlike the comedies of Mae West, these pictures emphasized the situating of women in acceptable social identities. Will Hays, as the figurehead and liaison between the industry and both financial and religious circles, demanded of the studios that women’s films must comply with the Code, otherwise large fines would be doled, jobs would be lost, and the industry would potentially forfeit self-censorship for government control. Given that all the major studios had willingly entered into contractual agreement with the Hays Office, its authority began to show results. Among other stricter adherences to the Code, supporting more traditional gender roles took precedence in movie content and message, thus screwball comedy became “sex comedy without the sex.” Examples of this new Hollywood story formula are *It Happened One Night* (1934), *Theodora Goes Wild* (1936), and *Nothing Sacred* (1937). Screwball comedy was not completely removed from the controversy over representation of women, however. Also examined in this chapter are four pictures from the genre which did contain material flagged by the Production Code Administration: *The Awful Truth* (1937), *My Favorite Wife* (1940), *Two-Faced Woman* (1941), and *Palm Beach Story* (1942). Collectively, these motion pictures illustrate the shift in the presentation of women and sexuality under the refurbished Production Code of 1934.

Chapter Three will also look at the period from 1934-1942, but it will return first to a selection of Mae West comedies and second to fallen woman films, all produced

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after the implementation of the new Production Code regulations. It is important not only to understand how a new production cycle emerged through screwball comedies, but also how pre-existing film production cycles changed its ways to adhere more strictly to the demands for films that clearly defined the moral boundaries of good and evil. By examining the films *Belle of the Nineties* (1934) and *Klondike Annie* (1936) the chapter compares these latter pictures to those produced under the more flexible standards of the Code at the beginning of the decade. West’s status as an acclaimed presence in Hollywood continued after the changes under the MPPDA’s stricter enforcement, but her latter films never achieved the level of success as those produced before 1934. Understanding the problems her films experienced with the Production Code Administration illustrate one of the ways that Hollywood responded to changing social realities for women and, thus, created a more conservative representation of how women should act, both on screen and off.

Likewise, the final chapter revisits the fallen woman genre. The pictures continued to exist albeit eclipsed by the lighter entertainment provided by the screwball comedies, and it is important to understand this dynamic in their respective responses to changing social realities. Fallen woman films lost their edge, stretching the definition of the genre so far that the “fall” is almost indiscernible, indiscriminate from the general drama genre. In assessing the films *Alice Adams* (1935), *The Shopworn Angel* (1938), and *Kitty Foyle* (1940), the fallen woman films of the latter part of the period also provide material with which to interpret shifting views concerning the problematic genre of “sex films.” Explaining the alterations in this type of women’s film, in terms of content and message, elucidates the images and issues labeled indecent by end of the
decade. This in turn further illustrates the effects of the conservative shift in ideals of appropriate gender roles, and how Hollywood responded by playing a significant part in promoting and reinforcing that conservativism to the public.

The Conclusion will bring the issues discussed back together to restate the main thrust of the research - that both the views of gender and sexuality in American society, and the social function of film as a form of mass media underwent pivotal conservative changes during the Depression. Screen sexuality did not disappear, but rather, the filmmakers repackaged it in less menacing ways. By the end of the thirties, female characters rarely strayed far from acceptable gender roles. Regardless, popularity of the movies remained consistent even as economic fortunes were at their worst. As historian Andrew Bergman writes, “During the most abysmal days of the early thirties, as economic paralysis spread, snuffing out a shop here, a bank there, a factory somewhere else, movie attendance still averaged an astonishing sixty to seventy-five million persons each week.”

Due to these attendance figures, contemporaries realized the importance of motion pictures, which became a social priority of particular significance. By analyzing the messages imbedded in popular films and interpreting how such messages shift throughout time, studies of film can continue the trend of pulling resources from a wide range of disciplines to better understand socio-cultural trends in entertainment, how the entertainment industry changes itself, and how it affects views of women. This study provides one example of the many ways that film and its social context become valuable source material from which to draw knowledge about the cultures of the past.

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The initial purpose of this project was to trace gender perceptions through a dichotomy of two film genres: fallen woman and screwball comedy. The first a melodramatic genre which created female protagonists threatening to the idea of virtuous femininity and the second a light, comedic type reestablishing the socially appropriate place of women in relationships with the opposite sex; these films were to be examples of how Hollywood reacted to social attitudes. While this basic premise held, the actual dynamics between the movie industry and society were significantly more complex. The movie industry did acquiesce to the external forces demanding change and economic crisis played an influential role in the transition, evident in the marked change in production after 1934. Portrayals of women were not fixed according to genre production, however, and fallen woman films did not immediately disappear as screwball comedy became popular. The trend made Hollywood pay attention to the fact that times were undeniably changing. Also, the changes occurred across the board, as views on the function of film as socially influential superceded artistic merit. Hollywood could no longer exist as the producer of pure entertainment unafraid of controversy when strapped with the dictate of moral, educational responsibility.

In revealing this complexity, the historical significance of this research lies in the focus on the dynamics of the American movie industry and the greater society of which it was a part during a turbulent episode in U.S. history. This project contributes not only to film history, but also enhances other areas of American history. Through analysis of changing cinematic representations of women during a period of threatened traditional gender roles, it becomes clear that as a popular form of mass media communication, movies shouldered a large share of the civic burden which sought to outline moralistic
views of gender. An analysis of these gender perceptions through the lens of women’s
cultural films creates a new perspective with which to study cultural history, women’s history,
and the history of sexuality. As historian E. Ann Kaplan wrote, one of the values of
movie analysis, and the reason why it continues to proliferate into the twenty-first
century, is that such scholarship addresses “the relationship between images of women on
film (their social and sexual roles) and what scholars can discover about women’s lives in
any particular context within which a film is produced.”²⁸ Due to the relative infancy of
the movie industry as a large-scale business, its explosive popularity, and the economic
upheaval it endured, the period surrounding the Depression offers a unique context to do
so.

CHAPTER ONE
TESTING THE WATERS OF CHANGE

Correct entertainment raises the whole standard of a nation. Wrong entertainment lowers the whole living conditions and moral ideals of a race.

--The Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America Production Code

The earliest histories of film and the motion picture industry were written by 1930s contemporaries, and their works suggest that even as Americans were in the midst of the Depression, they knew not only that the period was a pivotal time for the United States, it was also a significant time for motion pictures, the fastest growing form of popular entertainment. In the thirties, scholars already contemplated the role film played in their lives and that of generations to come. The Depression was unprecedented in American history in countless ways, but relevant to the perceived cultural power of the movie industry, the Depression caused a general self-awareness of the changing nature of society and its entertainment. Some attributed disproportioned and great weight to what films say about their times. Iris Barry wrote in 1939, “... people will continue, as now, to esteem the film not for its own sake but because in it we can see at first hand a truthful (if not always obvious) reflection of the mores of the society that produced it and that

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enjoyed it.” An influential factor was the apparent lack of effect the stock market crash of 1929 held upon the industry. Adolph Zukor recalled, “It may be that people wanted to forget their troubles by going to a picture, and of course the ‘talkies’ had been a big shot in the arm…People spoke of the motion picture industry as ‘depression-proof’.”

At this point in time, the motion picture industry was run by the Big Five: Loew’s, Inc. (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer), Warner Brothers, Paramount, 20th Century-Fox, and RKO; and to a certain extent the Little Three: Columbia, Universal, and United Artists. The studio heads were completely cognizant of the extent of their powers. They knew that the risk they took on the talking films had paid off, and that the public wanted realism and a gritty, bawdy battling of the social evils. Audiences might have wanted sex and violence, but the studios were not intent on producing dirty or immoral pictures. Rather, the issue for writers, directors, and producers was not so much defying religion or morality but standing up for their rights and their artistic freedoms. Even though First Amendment protection of freedom of speech did not extend to motion pictures until 1952, moguls did not feel that outside anti-movie fanatics had the right to dictate what could and could not be produced according to their personal opinions. Critics had long been voicing their opinions on the possible harm pictures could inflict upon susceptible motion picture audiences, and censors were around for a decade before the creation of an industry-wide organization and implementation of any code of ethics. For all practical

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purposes, however, the studios simply stood their ground and insisted that they knew their business best. The industry heads promised to use good judgment and dismissed the faint cries of dissent particularly after the trend toward state censorship board creation was quelled. So what happened to make all this change?

In order to address this and the issues surrounding gender expectations in American society and film during the Depression, and further, the ways in which film production played a role in transmitting social attitudes through emphasis on regulations and standards for production, it is important to understand the historical context. The broad changes occurring in the United States and the movie industry bear influence on the transitional nature of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America’s (MPPDA) Production Code and ultimately within the films themselves. The decade of the 1930s was a turbulent era in the United States. Economically, politically, socially and culturally the country changed in unprecedented ways. While contributing factors continue to be the subject of scholarly contention, and the specific effects remain the subject of voluminous interpretations, connections to the impact of the Depression on contemporary perceptions of gender provide opportunity for new areas of analysis. After briefly outlining how the Depression took hold of the country, this chapter first examines the developments surrounding the creation of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America, and the set of rules it established for the production of films. The second section analyzes two groups of motion pictures released under this new Production Code, and explains the ways that studios largely sidestepped the objectives of its creators.
The stock market crash of October 29, 1929 otherwise known as “Black Tuesday” became a symbol for the most enduring depression in the United States to date. What resulted was a catastrophic chain of events that devastated the American economy and economies abroad. Individual banks closed in alarming numbers - 9,000 by 1933. The total money supply decreased by a third, and the American gross national product dipped from over $104 billion in 1929 to $76.4 billion in 1932. Unemployment rose to an inconceivable 25% by 1933, which did not even factor in the high numbers of workers forced to cope with slashed hours and wages.\(^5\) As the Republican administration of Herbert Hoover came to a close, and the Democratic administration of president-elect Franklin D. Roosevelt took power, political debates flared over appropriate courses of action. Greatly simplified, the former party argued for a tightening of fiscal control and monetary policies particularly in respect to international trade, and the latter for increased domestic relief in the form of government programs that would counteract the structural crisis of under consumption (too little market for too much production), which many liberal thinkers viewed as the root of the problem.\(^6\)

Contemporaneous scholars looked to the twenties for answers to the questions surrounding how the Depression evolved and how the country should deal with it. The inherent problem was how to maintain the prosperous and flourishing climate of a new consumer society as its very existence was shaken to the core. Their solution deferred the blame from capitalism itself to other causes. Some current scholars argue that reform-


\(^6\) One of the more recent and most comprehensive historical accounts of American society during the Depression is David M. Kennedy, *Freedom from Fear: The American People in Depression and War, 1929-1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).
minded citizens felt the moral fiber of American society unraveled. They blamed excess which became virtuous as many Americans rode the wave of peace and prosperity following the close of the Great War. On a microcosmic level, similar sentiments surrounded the movie industry. The economic expansion of the 1920s and the acquisitions of theaters on the part of the major studios combined with the advent of sound technology resulted in overextended businesses that became vulnerable to public demand. Some thought Hollywood, in its “golden age” of studio production, was immune to such mundane realities. In actuality, the movie industry was also in a contentious position, situated at its own intersection of social, political, economic, and cultural shellshock.

To understand how the Production Code developed it is important to understand the impetus for it, and briefly outline the shortcomings of self-censorship efforts leading up to its creation. Collective industry efforts at “cleaning up” the motion pictures actually began under the auspices of studio heads and industry leaders in 1922 with the formation of the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), the first trade association of the motion picture industry. One of the most important characteristics of early self-regulation measures was that they made acceptable some representation of immoral behaviors and actions, so long as the message affected at the end was that good triumphs over evil as immorality received due punishment. To lead the crusade Will H. Hays, the former chairman of the Republican National Committee

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7 Richard Maltby addresses the influence of consumer culture on motion pictures prior to and during the Depression in “‘Baby Face’ or How Joe Breen Made Barbara Stanwyck Atone for Causing the Wall Street Crash,” *Screen* 27 (March-April 1986): 22-45.
and later Postmaster General under Warren Harding, was appointed president of the MPPDA by the same men who formed the organization.\(^8\) Lewis J. Selznick and Saul Rogers approached Will Hays while he still held the office of Postmaster General, representing the entire industry led by men such as Marcus Loew, Adolph Zukor, Joseph M. Schenck, Nicholas M. Schenck, Carl Laemmle, Sam Golwyn, and William Fox among other powerful studio figureheads. They offered the job to Hays on December 8, 1921, asking him to be the leader and spokesman for the industry. They offered him a salary of $100,000 a year.\(^9\) Hays accepted on January 14, 1922.

According to Hays, his family influenced his decision. He observed his six-year old son, Bill Jr., playing with his cousins on Christmas morning when an argument broke out. In their new cowboy suites, the boys fought fiercely over who would get to be Bill Hart and “suddenly he realized… that the movies were important to millions of children and grownups. It wasn’t just a job that had been offered to him. It was a challenge, a duty.” Raymond Moley recounts this story, and vouches that “the tears still come to his eyes when he tells that he stood up, then, in the shadow of the Christmas tree, and silently repeated the vow of St. Paul: ‘And this I do.’”\(^{10}\) Studio heads were familiar with Hays, who worked with them on the newsreels for the Harding campaign and knew he was the epitome of wholesome, American morals and values. Olga J. Martin, former secretary to Joseph I. Breen, Director of the Production Code Administration of the MPPDA recalled, “Because of his political experience and his excellent personal reputation as an Elder of


the Presbyterian Church, his selection as the head of the industry was highly approved by
most factions.”

Hays’s first attempt to put forth in writing a set of guidelines is known as the
MPPDA’s “Gentleman’s Agreement” with the producers. It became known as the
“Formula” and consisted of “Thirteen Points,” dictating the ways that sex, crime,
religion, and politics were not to be portrayed. Religion was not the main reason for
these early efforts, but Hays felt that if he could collaborate with religious officials then it
would stop public outrage before it could do any real damage to the business of
producing. Moreover, the issue of gender representation was problematic in different
types of film for women and men respectively. The latter was an issue involved in
appropriate content and message of gangster films. In general, however, the agreement
did not forbid portrayal of these topics; it merely prohibited favorable or sympathetic
treatment of vice and disrespect or offense toward religion and public officials.

State censorship boards had grown to existence in seven states, and moral outrage
continued to brew among religious organizations and reform groups. Outside pressures
led to the realization within the industry that more concrete measures needed to be taken
in establishing the realm of appropriate content. Member producers signed a resolution
on June 8, 1927 that added a self-regulation clause to the “Thirteen Points”, which

11 Olga J. Martin, *Hollywood’s Movie Commandments: A Handbook for Motion Picture Writers and

12 The full contents of the “Thirteen Points” are listed in Olga J. Martin, *Hollywood’s Movie
Commandments: A Handbook for Motion Picture Writers and Reviewers* (New York: The H.W. Wilson

13 Censorship boards were established in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Florida, New York, Maryland, Kansas, and
Virginia. One of Hays’s first tasks was to stop a censorship bill from becoming law in Massachusetts. He
was successful and it was the last introduced. See Gregory D. Black, *Hollywood Censored: Morality
explicitly listed nine offenses to be excluded from motion pictures.\textsuperscript{14} As Hays saw it, his purpose was to lead the MPPDA to develop wholesome pictures. The association was to guide producers in fostering cooperation among all involved parties for “the highest possible moral and artistic standards of motion picture production, by developing the educational as well as the entertainment value and the general usefulness of the motion picture, and by reforming abuses relative to the industry.”\textsuperscript{15} The focus upon details (listing specific offenses), however, decreased the strength of the industry’s efforts at a universal cleansing of motion pictures. Also, in 1927 Colonel Jason Joy was appointed head the Studio Relations Committee (SRC), which was to ensure decency in the motion pictures.\textsuperscript{16}

The significance of these developments is that with a lack of unified, in house standards of self-regulation and numerous interpretations of the ethical guidelines, outside efforts at censorship existed in conflict with the MPPDA before the creation of the Production Code as reformers and lobbyists viewed film production as deliberately evading and avoiding the rules. A case involving a Pathé film release of the movie \textit{Sal of Singapore} in January 1929 is an example. New York state film censor, James Wingate, director of the Motion Picture Division of the State Department of Education brought action on The Pathé Exchange, which was the studio responsible for the film, before the

\textsuperscript{14} “Profanity, suggestive nudity, illegal drug traffic, white slavery, miscegenation, venereal disease, childbirth, ridicule of the clergy and willful offense to any nation, race, or creed” were the nine terms of exclusion producers agreed to self-regulate. Olga J. Martin, \textit{Movie Commandments: A Handbook for Motion Picture Writers and Reviewers} (New York: The H.W. Wilson Company, 1937): 18.


Supreme Court over licensing. Originally licensed as a silent film, *Sal of Singapore* integrated dialogue after the fact, which Wingate argued necessitated a new licensing approval for release. As reported in *The New York Times*, at stake was a precedent for an extension of censorship on talking films.\(^{17}\) The spread of sound films incited new public debate over who should stamp a film “good” or “evil” because there was no precedent for the licensing or regulation of the transition. At this point in time, the private citizens still fought largely against official censorship, skeptical of governmental control of artistic freedom. In New York, citizens addressed a meeting of delegates to the motion picture convention of the National Board of Review on the subject. They argued, “The public, not official censors or reform groups, must be the film censor.” The delegates also “attacked all censorship as based on hatred of pleasure and happiness and linked it to religious intolerance in one form or another.”\(^{18}\)

In 1929, the Catholic Church backed the sporadic public demands for still more “morally decent” pictures, not because bishops and clergymen as yet desired to take on the industry, but they feared where it was going by the increasingly popular portrayals of controversial subject matter such as crime and adultery. The official Catholic position was that the film industry was beginning to promote “false sex standards, incitements to sexual emotion, and glorification of crime and criminal and debasing brutality.”\(^{19}\) This set the stage for the imposition of a formal code of ethics upon the entire industry. In order to compromise with the public, but to stave off federal censorship, Hays recruited


religious representatives of the parties who held a stake in continuing efforts to clean up the movies. He recruited Martin Quigley, publisher of the Motion Picture Herald and prominent member of the Catholic Church, and Daniel A. Lord, a nationally prominent and influential Catholic priest, who was familiar with the gray area between correct religious ideals and artistic license. Quigley assisted Lord in writing a draft of what they felt were appropriate boundaries by which to produce films. They completed a set of rules, regulations, guidelines, and justifications for implementation also considering drafts already drawn up by Hays himself, Jason Joy (head of the SRC, the precursor to the Production Code Administration), and various committees of Hollywood producers.

The result was the 1930 Production Code, an official MPPDA document that covered general principles, working principles, explicit limitations for details, and directions for the application of these regulations that consolidated the objectives of religious principles and box-office necessities. The latter was the most important consideration for the studios as they were unwilling to concede any profit to religious principles they felt was out of touch with the majority of their audiences. Theory did not carry over to practice, however, and as the next section illustrates, once the Depression deepened and attendance began to fall, box-office concerns and increasing economic instability took precedence as studios continued to push the moral limits of a Code that still held little power.

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Robert Sklar suggested, “In the first half decade of the Great Depression, Hollywood’s movie-makers perpetrated one of the most remarkable challenges to traditional values… the movies called into question sexual propriety, social decorum and the institutions of law and order.” Despite early efforts at outlining appropriate movie content, specific films continued production with the approval of the MPPDA, but still provoked the ire of religious organizations and reform groups. The discrepancy existed in the space left for judgment calls on the part of producers as to what favorable treatment of vice entailed. Fallen women films produced in the first four years after the establishment of the 1930 Production Code illustrate the unresolved controversy over the representation of women and sexuality. The films Madam Satan (1930), Possessed (1931), and Baby Face (1933) highlight the moral fault lines of views on acceptable femininity both in film and society.

Madam Satan is an early sound film that tested the limits of acceptable movie content in respect to women’s roles. The film first presents the heroine Angela Brooks as a cold, proper, self-righteous housewife of a man having a flagrant affair with an entertainer named Trixie. In a pivotal confrontation, Trixie tells Angela that she’s not fun enough or “hot” enough to keep her husband at home. To this Angela replies, “He wants ‘em hot does he? Well, I’ll give him a volcano!” The film climaxes at a masquerade party where Angela becomes the exotically masked woman, Madam Satan, and seduces

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her wayward husband away from his mistress. The resolution of the film finds Bob Brooks faithfully back at home with his wife.

The importance of this picture lies in the blurred lines of appropriate sexuality and marital fidelity. Cecil DeMille described his motivation for *Madam Satan*, his second sound film, as a story with which he wanted to illustrate that theory and practice were two separate concepts when it came to biblical themes. DeMille never shied away from controversy and never backed down to censorship, self or otherwise, and more times than not, he was clever enough to present his stories in such a way that censors felt he had gone too far, but could never present a valid rule he had broken. In this case, he managed to make the Sixth Commandment, “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” negotiable. In his words, “It is quite a clear, concise statement of one of the fundamental laws of marriage. But, in the human situations in which the Commandments are to be applied, it is necessary sometimes to do more than just promulgate the law. We may have to help each other keep it.”

How is this possible? According to DeMille, it is by cheating on your spouse with your disguised spouse.

The heroine, Angela, begins the film as a decent, moral wife, the epitome of upper-class Victorian womanhood, who is also a sad, lonely wife who knows her husband drinks at all hours of the night and cheats on her with a woman known for using her body to obtain money and material possessions from men. MGM and DeMille bypassed rejection from the Hays Office through negotiating a means to suit the end—-the moral message was that a wife must go to great lengths to protect the sanctity of her marriage. Angela beats Trixie at her own game, flaunting her sexuality to seduce all the

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men at the masquerade, including her own playboy of a husband. It was an instance in which artistic representation of evil-doing in the service of developing a moral conclusion made the content and message acceptable if perhaps questionable to some. Again, what was important to censors and thus to the MPPDA was that if evil must be portrayed, that which is right and wrong must not be confused.

One example of the fallen woman film which caught the attention of censors was the storyline that placed working class girls opposite successful men. In roles that became known as gold-diggers and kept women, actresses portrayed women able to obtain money and increased class status, but at the price of illicit sexual relations with powerful men. For example, *Possessed*, based on Edgar Selwyn’s play “The Mirage,” was a 1931 MGM release. Marion Martin, a young, ambitious factory worker, went to New York to find success at any cost. Her first exposure to big city life is a wealthy bachelor fond of the night life. He explains to her that with her looks, what she needed to do was find the richest man she could and let him spend his money. Instead she finds love as a kept woman to divorced lawyer/ aspiring politician Mark Whitney played by Clark Gable. Martin Quigley described this picture as “destructive to character and conduct,” and that “it tends to glorify vice and to make virtue appear stupid.”

This film’s liberal application of the Code provoked some figures within the MPPDA to view the crackdown by censors on gangster films as the reason why producers turned to sex films. Jason Joy’s opinion was that “with crime practically denied them, with box-office figures down, with high-pressure methods being employed

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to spur the studios to get in a little more cash, it was almost inevitable that sex, as the nearest thing at hand and pretty generally sure-fire, would be seized upon. It was.”

While there was truth in Joy’s assessment, there were other contributing factors culminating in the economic panic. All that was sure is that profit margins were rapidly decreasing. Theater admissions dropped more than 12 percent in 1931, and ticket prices fell 30 to 20 cents on average. In addition, according to Tino Balio, “To make matters worse, Hollywood saw production costs for the new talkies more than double and revenues from foreign markets dwindle.” This was on the heels of 1930’s all-time high attendance record of 80 million.

Those involved in the production of the film counted on their leading lady’s reputation to make up for the increasingly pressing business concerns. In the case of Possessed, Joan Crawford was one of the most popular box office stars at the time and MGM mogul, Irving Thalberg insisted her portrayal was perfectly acceptable. Much to Joy’s chagrin, Thalberg claimed “adultery, as a subject, was not a violation of the code. There would be no nudity in the film and he reassured Joy that the relationship between the two lovers would be handled with ‘good taste’.” Crawford’s character skirts acceptable boundaries that soon became unacceptable. Ironically, the pivotal scene in the film which makes it hard not to be sympathetic to Marion’s situation, was Thalberg’s one point of compromise with Joy. After realizing that people see her as Mark’s trophy, a cheap trick even, she reveals how important marriage really is to her. The relationship

27 Jason Joy to Joseph Breen, December 15, 1931, PCA Possessed Case File.


she has with Mark is monogamous, sincere, and loving. The problem is that the relationship portrayed illicit sexuality in a favorable light. Marion is such a devoted woman that the film eclipses the immorality of the relationship, as it exists out of wedlock. *Possessed* blurred the lines between good and evil, labels that became more important as Hollywood took the relative lack of public protest against the film as a sign to continue the production cycle of films similar to it.

It is one of the films that ultimately spurred the revised Production Code of 1934, and the crackdown on films that mandated the submission of scripts to the Studio Relations Committee and then its successor, the Production Code Administration. The film exists as a significant example of the controversies surrounding the representation of kept women precisely because the script was not submitted, as MGM bypassed the SRC and released the picture to the public without any input from the MPPDA’s in house censors. Jason Joy described the situation to Joseph Breen, “The philosophy of this one is wrong. For some reason we did not have the script and did not get in a crack before the picture was finished. This cannot happen again and was the chief reason the code was amended making submission of scripts mandatory.”30 The film’s scandal only escalated then, as the illicit relationship between the characters of Crawford and Gable extended off the screen as well as on. Although the two actors were married to other people, the Hollywood rumor mill leaked of a possible affair between them during production of the film. The social upheaval created by the movie reveals public sentiment that adhered to strict ideas of appropriate sexuality as between married men.

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and women only- ideas that Hollywood was expected to promote not defy as the decade progressed.

Two years later, Warner Brothers took the gold-digger story to an even more scandalous level. A third example of the fallen woman film that served to place issues of gender and gender roles high on the list of issues Hollywood studios needed to address more responsibly is *Baby Face*, the story of a working girl with a tragic past who used men for career advancement. 31 Barbara Stanwyck’s character, Lily Powers, grew up in a speakeasy where her father exchanged her physical services for politicians’ blind eye to his place of business. Early in the film, she refuses to perform her duties then leaves, vowing from that point on to use men as they had used her, and proceeds to become extremely wealthy. She moves up the career ladder at a bank by seducing men of increasingly important stature, until she ultimately marries the bank’s president, Courtland Trenholm played by George Brent. When the bank collapses, she leaves him rather than giving up her fortunes to help. Then, in a moment of epiphany, she realizes that she loves Trenholm and returns to him. According to censors, Stanwyck portrayed “sympathetically the immoral procedure of the heroine, it is capable of creating impressions and ideas which lead to what is commonly accepted as wrong conduct.” 32

Newly available case files contain changes forced into the script of *Baby Face* that illustrate the role Hollywood was to play in dictating certain standards of appropriate


femininity, namely that it was wrong and immoral to use sexuality for material gain.\textsuperscript{33} The original script concluded with Lily realizing that she loved Trenholm after he committed suicide. Negotiations with the SRC resulted in a different ending. Trenholm lives, he and Lily donate all of their fortunes to the bank’s recovery, and they live out their days poor but happy in a steel town much like the one Lily initially came from. The controversy surrounding the production of the picture and the forced moral message exemplify the complex social attitudes at play in determining appropriate film content.

Even with the changes, \textit{Variety} reported that the Hays office received serious criticism from church and women’s organizations “on account of a new cycle of bad girl pictures now being marketed and readied for release.”\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Baby Face} was the first picture named. They did not feel that women’s films sent the messages out to audiences that good was good and evil, evil. Quigley later wrote, “Of especial importance is the unparalleled appeal of the motion picture to the youth who are in the most impressionable years of life, hungry for experience, real and vicarious.”\textsuperscript{35} The self-appointed moral guardians feared the inability of mass audiences young and old to distinguish between neither fantasy and reality nor right and wrong. Moreover, state censors also pushed to ban the film, sending the message to the industry that they no longer wanted fallen woman films altered in suitable ways; they wanted the production of the films cut from Hollywood repertoire completely. The movie represents the increasingly evident failure of negotiations between in house and outside censors to quell the charges of religious

\textsuperscript{33} For an extensive analysis of the Baby Face script and the many changes made upon it for SRC approval of the production, see Richard Maltby, “‘Baby Face’ or How Joe Breen Made Barbara Stanwyck Atone for Causing the Wall Street Crash,” \textit{Screen} 27 (March-April 1986): 22-45. \\
\textsuperscript{34} “Bad Girl Film Cycle Earns Frown of Hays,” \textit{Variety} (18 April 1933): 3. \\
\textsuperscript{35} Martin Quigley, \textit{Decency in Motion Pictures} (New York: Macmillan, 1937): 5-6.
circles (led by Quigley) that the motion picture industry simply ignored the calls for more decency in motion pictures.

The social realism characteristic of fallen woman films was not the only way studios were increasingly provoking the ire of conservative critics by pushing what they viewed as the boundaries of appropriate gender roles. In some ways the next group of films could get away with even more sexual freedom because it was done with laughter, about which some scholars now present as a direct assault that challenges “the social and symbolic systems that would keep women in their place.” In taking away some of the realism which had made fallen woman films so uncomfortable for defenders of traditional gender roles, Hollywood learned that laughter was a safer way to deal with sax than with the strong, defiant female characters of the melodrama.

In October 1932, the film, Night after Night marked Mae West’s crossover from theater to cinema. West’s most recent biographer, Jill Watts refers to the film as her “chance to enter Hollywood through the back door, slipping past Will Hays, who had banned her from moviedom.” Indeed, Mae West’s reputation preceded her, as she was no stranger to controversy over her bawdy and suggestive portrayals of streetwise heroines and in vaudeville and then mainstream Broadway. The character of Maudie Triplett proved to be no different. However, the social context was one in which her gritty, working-class sass was a welcome screen act for Depression-era audiences. This

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aspect of her persona was perhaps most incensing to her critics, who feared her power and influence over working-class women, who it may be recalled were threatening in their own right to the patriarchal dominance of public life. In *Night after Night* male lead George Raft plays Joe Anton, the former boxer turned speakeasy entrepreneur who longs to leave the underworld lifestyle and ascend to the ranks of the high class. The film establishes this at the start, as he longs to distance himself from the booze and gambling of his establishment, the “#55.” He employs a school teacher to educate him in etiquette as well as intellect and falls for a mysterious society girl who frequents his club alone. While Joe enters negotiations to sell his club with rival speakeasy owner and prominent gangster, Frankie Guard, as he gets closer to whom he now knows is Miss Jerry Healy, Mae West makes her colorful entrance.

Although she is billed fourth in this picture, Mae West according to Raft, “stole everything but the cameras.” Even though her debut role was as a supporting actress, by changing her role and writing her own lines into the script, she gave her audiences everything they expected. Exuding sexual innuendo and quipping with maxims and memorable one-liners, she made every scene a hit. As Maudie Triplett, she is the experienced drinker and ex-girlfriend of social-climber, Joe, and serves to remind him of where he came from throughout the film, reminding him that he was just fine the way he was before. This directly assaulted the gospel of uplift held so reverently by reformers. Ironically, in her personal life, she was far removed from much of what was considered unladylike. She rarely appeared among the Hollywood nightlife scene, and neither drank

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nor smoked. Uproariously, the one thing she did- and without apology- was the one unforgivable characteristic in a woman, she always enjoyed the company of men.

*She Done Him Wrong* was West’s first starring role, which was a hotly contested picture before one word of the screenplay was written. Perhaps it was her defiance of the male-dominated industry, or her ability to make such a joke out of sex and, in particular, her own sex appeal, but the minute the Hays Office found out that Paramount had bought her play *Diamond Lil*, Joseph Breen was waiting for the opportunity to stop the screen adaptation before it began. *Diamond Lil* was already a controversial Broadway hit, and it was only a matter of time before Paramount produced a spin off. In the end, Breen met with Paramount executives and assured Hays that *Diamond Lil* was coming to the movie houses but that he dictated enough changes to where it would be acceptable for release. Acceptable for release yes, but acceptable to the growing strength of conservative sentiment it was not even close. In it, the character Lady Lou delivers all that the censors feared by her innate ability to make sin amusing and attractive, but audiences still applauded. It is in this film where West’s infamous one-liner, “Come up and see me sometime,” made its film debut. *She Done Him Wrong* was listed in both *Variety’s Top-Grossing List* and *Film Daily’s Ten Best List* in 1933.

The film opens with the title screen, “The Gay Nineties/ When they did such things and they said such things on the Bowery. A lusty, brawling, florid decade when

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40 One of the promotional strategies Paramount used before the premier of this movie that did placate the Hays Office to an extent was to publicize such facts about her, as it was crucial to separate fact from fiction, Mae from Maudie. Jill Watts, *Mae West: An Icon in Black and White* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001): 149.

41 *She Done Him Wrong*, Dir. Lowell Sherman, Perfs. Mae West, Cary Grant, 65 min., Prod. Paramount, 1933.

there were handlebars on lip and wheel- and legs were confidential!” What is interesting is that this disclaimer appears to serve as a green light to the chagrin of censors to irreverently show images of the sinful environment of the Bowery. A performance monkey turning tricks on the street, women on bicycles, a man ignoring the mess of a horse on the street, a policeman’s permissiveness toward a man selling presumably “hot” jewelry out of a suitcase, women arm-in-arm coming out of closed doors, and someone else being tossed out of a saloon rolled across the reel like a call list of inappropriate glorification of vice outlined by the Code. Inside the “establishment” of Gus Jordan, imbibed men observe a portrait over the free lunch of Gus’s kept woman as a reclining nude.

Aspiring boss Dan Flynn enters with a plan to expose Gus’s dirty business to the law so he can take over the joint, the city, and the girl. The last item he eluded should be up for bids easily enough if the price is right. This woman is Lady Lou, whom he calls a “pretty slick article” and laughs at Gus saying, “Would you believe it? He actually thinks she’s in love with him!” As the movie develops, Lou meets Captain Cummings (Cary Grant), the man who runs the mission next door to the dance hall. She entertains the idea of getting to know him to her maid, Pearl, who promptly reminds her that diamonds do not come from preachers. Lou corrects her by reminding Pearl that he is not a preacher, not that it matters. For Lou, there is only one kind of man, the kind that cannot resist her. In the end she proves her theory correct. Cummings turns out to be a secret agent called “The Hawk” who ultimately busts Gus for white slavery and forgery. At the conclusion of the film, it appears as though Cummings is taking Lou to jail as well, but instead removes all the diamond jewelry from her left hand and replaces them with one small
ring and tells her that she’s his prisoner, and he’s going to be her jailer for a long, long
time. What is significant about all this within the context of the Depression is that while
married women were seen as social threats to the labor force, marriage and childrearing
was seen as an economic threat for the survival of unmarried couples, and thus, single
girls. That West’s characters salaciously seduced even the most morally upright male
characters, was putty to mold in the hands of reformers now armed with the social
scientific logic which emerged at this time to explain the perceived moral decline of the
country. This vocal minority complained *She Done Him Wrong* left a dangerously false
sex standard for these impressionable minds, but it was too popular and too successful for
their issues to taken into account by its producers.

One scene in which Lou challenges appropriate gender roles occurs when she
sends for a man named Jacobson, who owns the building in which Cummings runs the
mission. With words that could come straight out of a male lead’s mouth, she negotiates
the purchase of the building by bringing Jacobson down from $25,000 to $12,000 and
tosses him a diamond necklace worth that amount. With the effect of further
emasculating the role of Lou, she replies to the question, “How do I know they’re real?”
with an answer befitting the smoothest of a seasoned business professional. She says,
“Because I say so, and you ain’t never heard of me cheating anyone did you?” Jacobson
accepts her at her word, saying, “No, not about money.” This movie premiered in
January 1933, during the height of the Depression, when women were challenging the
public sphere which involves such business transactions. Thus her sophistication in the
matter existed as a blatant affront to ideals about appropriate, subordinate femininity. It
is a classic Mae West moment that covers every angle in its provocation of polite society.
The Hays Office knew her controversial, gender-bending humor well and warned Paramount moguls that while West vehicles barely fell within the bounds of acceptable content and message, they were risky ventures. The studio took a risk on using her despite the warnings it to save the studio from bankruptcy. In his autobiography, Adolph Zukor wrote, “I must pay tribute to another durable trouper, Mae West, for the powerful lift she gave us out of the depression mire. Neither the sweet ingénue nor the glamour girl fit the depression years. Mae did.”

In a pivotal scene between Grant and West, her self-mocking but strong and confident, unapologetic personae present in so many movies, is summed up:

Cummings: So all this is your famous collection, hey?
Lou: This is just my summer jewelry. You ought to see my winter stuff.
Cummings: I see.
Lou: You know it was a toss up whether I’d go in for diamonds or singing in the choir. The choir lost.
Cummings: Well, they’re wonderful. But they always seem so cold to me. They have no warmth, no soul. I’m sorry you think more of your diamonds than you do of your soul.
Lou: I’m sorry you think more of my soul than you do of my diamonds. Maybe I ain’t got no soul.
Cummings: Oh, yes you have. But you keep it hidden under a mask. You’ll wake up and find it sometime. Haven’t you ever met a man that could make you happy?
Lou: Sure, lots of times.

As Cummings leaves, she tries to lay the good night kiss on him and he shies away. It is a complete reversal of gender roles and is one of the reasons why the Hays Office was so disapproving of anything Mae West touched.

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Later that same year, *I’m No Angel* premiered. The trailer tells audiences straight from their star, “No use talking… I’m a woman of action!” This story begins at Big Bill Barton’s Wonder Show, a circus where “The Incomparable Tira, Singing and Dancing Marvel of the Age” is the main attraction. Tira, played by West, is so mesmerizing that a big part of the profits come from the pockets of distracted men and her boyfriend, Slick Wiley’s sticky fingers. After a performance one night, Tira goes to Raja, the circus’s fortune teller, who sees a very wealthy man in her future, to which she quips, “What? Only one?” He then says that he does see two. Raja warns her to be careful on this night, but tomorrow will be a lucky one. Later in the evening, she meets up with what she believes to be a wealthy man from the audience of her show. In mid-kiss, Slick comes in and knocks their chump out. They think Slick killed the man, drag him out into the hall, and Slick steals his ring. When he comes around, he goes with the cops to the circus and they arrest Slick immediately. In order to bail Slick out, Tira makes a deal with Big Bill to start up an act in which she sticks her head in a lion’s mouth.

The idea is a hit and Tira goes straight to the Big Show at Madison Square Garden. After a performance as the now renowned lion tamer, she entertains a group of “swells” and one of them, Kirk Lawrence, takes particular interest in her and begins to shower her with expensive gifts. Eventually, Kirk’s business partner and cousin, Jack Clayton played by Cary Grant, intervenes by going to see Tira. His intentions are simply to convince her to reconsider breaking up an engagement if she does not truly love Kirk, but what happens instead is that they both fall for each other. They plan to get married

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and she tells Big Bill that she’s quitting the show, but he thinks otherwise and plots to destroy the relationship. To do so, he employs Slick to sabotage it by meeting Clayton without her knowledge and convinces him that she no longer wants to see him. From Tira’s end, all she knows is that Clayton called off their engagement with no explanation, so she sues him for breach of promise, a suit that he allows her to win. By the end of the film, Tira and Clayton figure out that she was framed, and that they still love each other. She rips up the settlement check and they start back up where they left off.

West’s films were such persistent problems for the Hays Office in large part because ironically they contained no sex. It was everywhere and elusive, but the most risqué moments in any of her films dealt with single kisses. She had perfected the art of signifying sex while technically adhering to all the rules. *I’m No Angel* is one of the most illustrative examples of this “problem.” Tira has multiple phonograph recording of her song, “No One Loves Me Like that Man,” inserted several different origins for “that Man,” replacing the word *that* with Dallas, Frisco, New York, etc. so she’s prepared for every moment of entertaining different men at the spur of the moment. Interestingly, when Paramount originally sent the song titles for the film to the Hays Office, the title of this song contained the phrase “No One Does Me.” The in house censors are responsible for the change from “does” to “love.”45 In the film, she is also forced to hum parts of the song that contain lyrics that were too explicit for the screen, which further accentuates her ability to signify sexuality through her delivery of the hum, even though it was an attempt to water her down. Tira keeps a tower of pictures in her penthouse sitting room. The pictures are of all the men she has known and they sit perched beside figurines of

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animals. It is up to the audiences to infer how she came to characterize each man with specific animal-type ways. As if she were a bachelor bragging about conquests to the boys, Tira nonchalantly gossips about all of her men with her maids, whom she informally refers to as her girls. Scenes such as these made it clear that heroines were far from cleaning up their acts.

*I’m No Angel* became even more popular than *She Done Him Wrong*, with record attendance in its first two weeks. West had become a working-class heroine- a champion of the common folk, which in part is why censors were so outraged. If working class women were a threat to the survival of the country, her presence in popular film only encouraged a bigger threat. *Motion Picture Magazine* even drew comparisons between her and the new president in an article describing how she, too was just what the country needed, “This… is the day of directness, honesty, ‘facing things.’ It is the day of Roosevelt in the White House- warm, human, and earthy, a forthright person doing understandable things to comfort us. It is the day of Mae West in films- warm, human, and earthy, doing equally understandable things to cheer us.”46 As an actress who faced and challenged men and society both on and off the screen, it becomes more and more clear how she reveals the fault lines of appropriate femininity. In numerous instances she incensed the Production Code Administration, the Catholic Church, and civilian reform groups. Her films were a catalyst leading up to the boiling point that was soon to come, squaring off the creativity of writing departments with better organized religious pressure

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that formulated an economic threat sufficient enough to make the industry see their version of the light.
CHAPTER TWO

TRIUMPH OF THE PRODUCTION CODE

The Federal Government, in its NRA program, is not interested in censorship. The problem of the better screen is one of better public taste.

--Sol Rosenblatt, NRA movie code administrator

By the mid-Thirties, reformers, critics, and religious groups saw cause for concern in the role motion pictures began to play in people’s lives. The men who wrote the Code began to agree. What was once hoped to be a positive, uplifting influence upon the American public was now viewed as a threat to the nation’s moral well-being. Whether or not this was actually the case is difficult to ascertain, but what is of greater import is that the danger was acute and real in the minds of those who perceived it, and it was a rallying point around which critics organized more forcefully to push for cleaner films. Proponents of censorship felt a monster had been unleashed by their willingness to let the motion picture industry self-regulate movie content and message. Hollywood stars began to take on mythical, exalted status. For their part, the female actresses were setting fashion trends, affecting colloquial speech, and becoming heroines to American audiences. Jean Harlow made popular revealing halter tops. Backs dipped in dresses made out of increasingly slinky silk fabrics. Women began to wear pants like Marlene Dietrich and Greta Garbo. Even sweaters began to make conservative critics nervous as

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1 Motion Picture Herald (17 February 1934): 10.
they became increasingly tighter. Mae West had become infamously quotable and her one-liners etched themselves into popular usage.

All the while, the events of the Depression created a heightened sensitivity to motion pictures that challenged contemporary perceptions of appropriate gender roles and acceptable sexuality. An important illustration of this unfolds in the changes affected in Hollywood from 1934 to 1942, in terms of the industry itself and the movies it created. The limits of what could and could not be shown on the silver screen took a deliberately conservative turn at the same time in which American society experienced the nadir of the nation’s economic predicament. The conservative treatment of sexual themes during this period subdued the more open and risqué treatment of early thirties films. This contrast stems from variations in the role of censorship and contemporary interpretations of the motion picture industry’s efforts at self-regulation through the document known since 1930 as the Production Code. The federal government’s NRA program ruled that morality in motion pictures was out of its jurisdiction. That task now legally and formally fell under the authority of the Hays Office. An examination of the nature of the Motion Picture Production Code and the movies that the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA) approved after the pivotal year of 1934 illustrates the change in social views of gender and how the movie industry played a significant role in dictating the boundaries of that shift to the public. This in turn, further illustrates the crisis of traditional gender expectations sparked in American society during the Depression.

In order to discuss the shifting definitions of appropriate representation of gender roles and female sexuality in the production of women’s films during the latter part of the
1930s and into the 1940s, this chapter contains four sections. The first section explains why the year 1934 was indeed pivotal in an examination of the developments surrounding the Code at this time. By presenting the social context surrounding the forced strictures on self-regulation that dictated decency in films, it becomes evident that the Depression-era crisis of gender expectations; perceived by religious and civic groups, provided impetus to the increasing emphasis on strict compliance with the mandates of the Production Code. This was due in large part to the outside economic pressure applied most intensely by Catholic leadership aligned with financial backers of the industry’s projects during 1933-1934, making the industry more vulnerable and more willing to experiment with new production cycles. The second section briefly discusses the screwball comedy film genre and some of the reasons for its successful production in the face of decreased artistic freedom in terms of gender and sexuality.

The next section highlights screwball comedies approved by the MPPDA’s Production Code Administration (PCA), with the consent of outside interest groups. Finally, the chapter examines a second group of screwball comedies produced under the ratified regulations, but not wholly endorsed by the PCA, as they contained material flagged by in house and outside censors as potentially offensive. In effect, thus, the Production Code became a method to control the content and, more importantly, the message of motion pictures. Analysis of the historical context of the Code, the films themselves and the controversies surrounding their production reveal that rather than existing as an ineffective form of control at the start of the decade, the reasserted Production Code of 1934 was instead a flexible, broadly defined set of guidelines modified and interpreted with varying emphases over time.
The change in Hollywood standards of acceptable content was as much a change in the emphasis on values and moral message as it was a strengthened implementation of the Code, which underwent drastic changes in administration culminating in 1934. An industry insider remarked in 1937, “The moral element appears to have won the war for decency in films, but the public must remain wide awake to secure itself against a return of the abuses which brought on the crisis.”

Pictures of the so-called pre-Code years allowed details that were later deemed evil because in the end the message came through that evil was punished and good triumphed over it. As the Depression destabilized the business of Hollywood, however, relaxed control over the details became stricter. Moral guardians backed by social scientific studies argued any presentation of immoral behavior glamorized such action and simply could no longer be tolerated as the nuclear family and moral turpitude of children was at stake.

A battle of two views over the function of movies as art came to a head. The secular view was that motion pictures existed purely as a form of entertainment, but the religious view was that with the popularity of such entertainment came enormous civic responsibility to uphold the high standards of morality so sorely needed during such turbulent times.

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4 Raymond Moley published a comprehensive contemporary account of the debate over the cultural power of movies upon American society as the decade came to a close. See Raymond Moley, *Are We Movie-Made?* (New York: Macy-Masius, 1938).
Nonetheless, by 1934 those who pushed for increased standards of moral and ethical motion pictures concluded that Hollywood’s self-regulation still left much to be desired. Men like Hays and Joy as well as Joy’s successors, James Wingate and Joseph Breen, knew that there remained a lack of continuity and strength in their efforts. They understood that the necessary changes need not come from alterations of the Code itself, but from finding ways to prevent producers from violating it. Combined with increased financial strain upon the studios due to reverberating effects of overextension from the implementation of sound technology, the situation was one in which producers felt it a necessary risk to stretch the limits of appropriate content and presentation for a chance at selling more tickets. The ethical gamble was a well known development.\(^5\) According to Raymond Moley, “It [the movie industry] was everybody’s business. That is why it is a miracle that it did not become the government’s business.”\(^6\) It did come close, but Hays regained control. Several important reactionary events occurred in the summer of 1934 that altered movie production for the remainder of the decade.

One instrumental development occurred outside of the industry. On the heels of the Payne Fund studies that propagandized the detrimental effects of movies upon the public and children in particular, the Catholic bishops of the United States organized a national campaign to address Hollywood’s moral impropriety. In April 1934, they organized the Legion of Decency, an organization created to demand cleaner pictures from Hollywood, which immediately gained membership across denominations of citizens who pledged to boycott films they found offensive and indecent. At the height of

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the Legion’s campaign in June, an estimated 11,000,000 Americans had signed pledges.\footnote{Olga J. Martin, *Hollywood’s Movie Commandments: A Handbook for Motion Picture Writers and Reviewers* (New York: The H.W. Wilson Company, 1937): 33.} If fully mobilized, the Catholic demographic was an influential force. They made up one-fifth of the population, but they were mainly located in all of the major east coast cities where studios owned first-run theaters. If sufficiently organized their withdrawal of patronage was large enough to make Hollywood pay attention to what they wanted, which was cleaner movies. One of their most pressing demands was that female leads provide more respectable role models through their characterizations. Significantly, the demand existed in a continuum of debates spanning as far back as the creation of the industry itself, but the threat of mass boycotts was a serious economic consideration, finally providing impetus for the MPPDA to take notice and force adherence from studio producers. It was an important factor in the decision of the Hays Office to call for the changes he had been attempting to implement for over a decade.

That change came the following month. The developments that occurred within the Hays Office involved the implementation of the Production Code. The appointment of Joseph I. Breen to head the newly established Production Code Administration (PCA) had a symbolic strengthening effect on the Code. Breen was a staunch Irish Catholic who was the confidant of several important bishops throughout the country. His position was always dictated more by moral than economic expediency regardless of the studios’ position on the matter of film content and message. While Joy saw himself as an advisor in the film production process, Breen let no one mistake the fact that he was a censor. The PCA replaced the Studio Relations Committee and assumed responsibility for enforcing the existing Production Code through newly established, non-negotiable
penalties. To ensure universal compliance, the PCA bound all MPPDA member companies to the same rules, which they willingly signed a written contract agreeing to complicity. None would “distribute or release or exhibit any picture, whether produced by it or by a producer distributing through its facilities, unless it had received a certificate of approval signed by the director of the Production Code Administration and bearing the P.C.A.’s seal.”

The seal appeared in the opening credits of all movies produced from 1934 to 1966 when the Production Code was replaced by the ratings system in effect today. Any violation would be subject to a $25,000 fine. This included film production which did not receive the PCA stamp of approval before release, and productions that altered pictures after gaining such approval. Variety magazine called the situation between Church leaders and film producers a “semi-truce.” The article states that the parties entered “a state of armistice” as industry and Church officials understood their respective positions and each agreed to attend to their responsibilities in cleaning up the celluloid menace. The official day of reckoning was set for July 15, 1934.

The combined effect was an ultimatum aimed at the entire industry; films must adhere to all of the regulations of the Code. Publicly, Hays issued a statement in the Motion Picture Herald warning Hollywood studios of the thin ice they walked upon in respect to the stance of the business and financial end of the industry based in New York. If the current studio heads would not follow orders, the east coast executives would replace them.

Unofficially, he dictated a memorandum stating even one immoral

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9 “Church, Films, Semi-Truce,” Variety (3 July 1934): 5, 45.
10 “Industry’s Self-Regulation Starts This Week; Hays, Breen, Tellin’ ‘Em,” Variety (10 July 1934): 5.
11 Motion Picture Herald (29 April 1933): 9.
picture could topple the whole studio system, forcing “the entire Industry to submit to
Federal censorship, which would mean… ‘the Industry would be placed in a straight
jacket… and only be able to produce “Jack and the Bean Stalk” and fairy tales’.”¹² It was
a shrewd business maneuver on the part of Hays. He used multiple persuasions in order
to get the point across that the Code must be obeyed.

As the PCA tightened its grip on movie content from 1934 on, producers
developed an alternate means of evading the censors by juxtaposing inference to sex with
slapstick humor rather than brazen sexuality in gritty drama, as was permissible before.
While often times, the melodrama of fallen woman films dealt with the dichotomy
between good and evil, comedy applied to women’s films made the battle a non-issue. In
other words, any evil or sexual perversion was portrayed in such a light that the audience
is “in on the joke.” Themes such as adultery, bigamy, or other illicit sexual relations
exist but always out of a miscommunicated scenario. The application of a new humorous
slant to women’s film created a type of picture which came to be called screwball
comedy; “‘Daffy’ comedies became the fashion. Here the genteel tradition is ‘knocked
for a loop’: heroes and heroines are neither lady-like and [sic] gentlemanly.”¹³
Representation of women and sexuality became significantly more conservative than
before, but still presented female heroines in a manner that maintained for the studios the
popularity of feature length movie production while placating the protectors of moral

¹² Harry Zehner, memo to producers and writers, May 26, 1933, in Universal Studios Censorship file, USC
Special Collections Box 778, reprinted in Richard Maltby, “‘Baby Face’ or How Hoe Breen Made Barbara

¹³ Lewis Jacobs, The Rise of the American Film: A Critical History (New York: Harcourt, Brace and
import. What this means is that adultery was treated more delicately if at all, relations between men and women adhered to mainstream society’s gender expectations, and women always found out that pure and true love in wedlock is what they (and society vicariously) wanted all along. Without being overtly slapped in the face with a moral message, audiences could experience a more virtuous virtual adventure with a more sophisticated female lead. Situating women in acceptable social roles took precedence in movie conduct and out of the new conservative standards, screwball comedy became “sex comedy without the sex.”\textsuperscript{14}

With the general characteristics outlined, the examination of two representative groups of screwball comedies reveals another shift in public notions of gender and sexuality. The first group contains three examples of this new Hollywood story formula in compliance with the Code: \textit{It Happened One Night} (1934), \textit{Theodora Goes Wild} (1936), and \textit{Nothing Sacred} (1937). The second group contains pictures from the genre which did contain material flagged by the Production Code Administration, films for which the PCA created case files that document negotiations and correspondence concerning such objectionable matter. \textit{The Awful Truth} (1937), \textit{My Favorite Wife} (1940), \textit{Two-Faced Woman} (1941), and \textit{The Palm Beach Story} (1942) illustrate the changes manifest in the presentation of women and sexuality under the refurbished Production Code of 1934.

As the nation economically and morally appeared to exist on multiple planes, MPPDA director Will Hays saw the role of movies to be every bit the morale booster for

\textsuperscript{14} Andrew Sarris, “The Sex Comedy without Sex,” \textit{American Film} (March 1978): 8-15.
American entertainment that Roosevelt was for the country in general. Hays felt that the Production Code was not a means of repression but an opportunity to strengthen and unite the cultural landscape. Producers soon realized that following Hays’s guidelines for the entertainment industry would result in endorsing public opinion and yield significant profits. Screwball comedy became the ideal vehicle to promote this new moral purity with female protagonists that put a clean, romantic spin on comedy. As one historian suggests, “If early thirties comedy was explosive, screwball comedy was implosive: it worked to pull things together.”\(^{15}\) The pictures created a more sophisticated type of humor that poked fun at respectability while adhering to it at the same time- parodying the love story while redefining it. The films *It Happened One Night, Theodora Goes Wild*, and *Nothing Sacred* illustrate a few examples of this new brand of popular cinema born of the socially conservative Depression era context. This is not to speculate that the Code nor screwball comedy would have existed absent the Depression, but these pictures provide illustration of the limits set by self-regulation about the message Hollywood was to send out to audiences in respect to women’s roles and their acceptable involvement in sexual themes.

Frank Capra’s surprisingly successful film, *It Happened One Night* (1934), exists as one of the original attempts at the new screwball comedy film genre.\(^{16}\) Claudette Colbert plays the role of Ellie Andrews, the spoiled daughter of a wealthy business man who runs away to be with a man of whom her father disapproves, a man with whom she

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has already eloped, the playboy aviator King Westley. As she tries her hand at independence on a night bus to New York, she encounters news reporter Peter Warne (Clark Gable), who discovers her identity, and makes a deal with her. She gives him the exclusive story of her adventure and he will not notify her father of her whereabouts and forego the exorbitant monetary reward he offered. Throughout the trek to New York, Ellie encounters numerous situations in which Peter comes to her rescue. Although the two fall in love, ill-timed events lead to feelings of deception and rejection from both sides. The movie concludes as the two find their way back to each other- Ellie leaves Westley at the alter to find Peter and to become Mrs. Warne. It was completely traditional and exactly what the Legion of Decency pushed for in women’s films.

The screwball story was experimental. Producers were unsure of how audiences would react to the lighthearted and unassuming plot, and the larger studios bypassed it, leaving the risk to Columbia. Its success paved the way for the production trend, which almost immediately characterized a large number of Hollywood films from 1934-1942. *It Happened One Night* garnered four Academy Awards in 1934, providing an illustration of the motion picture industry’s skillful negotiation of the public’s fascination with sex films of the early thirties and the stricter demands of the latter years of the decade. *The New York Times* reviewed it as being “blessed with… a good quota of relatively restrained scenes.”

It was a significant effort on the part of Hollywood to tone down the representation of female sexuality and more strictly adhere to the Production Code. Colbert’s Ellie Andrews is caught in a love triangle, which finds moral resolution as she sanctifies her true love in matrimony to Warne. The fact that she left her fiancé on the

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day of her planned wedding becomes acceptable as Ellie’s father easily pays Westley off, then portrayed as a man of questionable character, in return for Westley’s acceptance of the annulment. One of the characteristics which made these movies cleverly successful is that rather than developing female characters as fallen women who ultimately choose the straight and narrow path, these women begin on the straight and narrow then experience farcical situations that fatefully destine them on the path of love and in most instances marriage. The new screwball comedy played in the fire without getting burned.

Another example of how Hollywood represented a new woman in film is *Theodora Goes Wild* (1936), a film that begins in the small Connecticut town of Lynnfield, where its Literary Circle is in a moral outrage over the serial publication of the latest best-selling novel, “The Sinner.”¹⁸ What they later find out is that the author, Caroline Adams, is actually Theodora Lynne, the youngest member of the most influential family in town. In the course of the story, Theodora falls in love with Michael Grant, the big city artist who paints the cover work for her risqué novels. Eventually, she stands up to her family and repressive small town, exposes her dual identity and then finds that Michael hides behind not only his own set of expectations and limitations but a failed marriage maintained for the political show of his family as well. This sets in motion a series of events in which Theodora turns the tables, forcing her love interest out of his gilded closet so that he can divorce and they can be together in the end.

Several factors inherent in this motion picture illustrate some of the ways Hollywood manipulated gender roles in order to purvey a moralistic message about women and sexuality under the new force of the Production Code after 1934. The most

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important of which involves the filmography of the lead actress. *Theodora Goes Wild* was the first comedic performance for Irene Dunne, who plays the heroine, Theodora. Previous to this 1936 film that garnered an Academy Award for best actress, she was notoriously known for her work in melodramas- the type of pictures the new Code so adamantly censured. Her role as a mistress in *Back Street* (1932) provoked moral resentment strong enough to force Hollywood to produce an alternate version of the film in 1941 with a new cast and crew.\(^{19}\) The significance here is the difference in how the two films conclude. In both Dunne’s characters become the mistress in love, however, that which made *Theodora Goes Wild* acceptable was that male character divorced to be with his true love in a decent, respectable manner, whereas in *Back Street*, the love was equally sincere, but the affair remained adulterous.

A final example of the successful shift in representation that adhered to the tightened standards and more traditional gender representation is *Nothing Sacred*, a Selznick International Pictures production in 1937.\(^{20}\) In it, Carole Lombard is Hazel Flagg, a small town girl diagnosed with radium poisoning sought out by washed up newspaper man, Wally Cook played by Fredrick March. After a sensational scandal over a cooked up story, Wally is on the verge of unemployment when he finds out about the tragic story of Hazel. He goes to her hometown and convinces her to accompany him in the city. New York instantly takes her in and through Wally’s stories of her tragic predicament, she becomes an overnight celebrity. Meanwhile, Hazel’s doctor has

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informed her that he was wrong, that she did not have radium poisoning nor was she going to die. In love with Wally, Hazel struggles to maintain the act of a dying woman so that he can get his story. Once the truth is revealed, and love professed, the picture ends with Hazel’s fabricated death occurring while she and Wally sail away on their honeymoon and into anonymity.

The film received the PCA seal of approval, albeit with apprehension on the part of Joseph Breen, which sprang from two scenes. In reference to the first, Breen explained to Selznick the reason was “because of details showing Freddie March kicking Carole Lombard in the posterior.” He continues, “While the shot may not be offensive, per se, it nevertheless is in conflict with our practice.” The second potential problem is in a scene in which Wally finds out that Hazel is healthy but his career will be ruined. In a panic to keep the secret, he tricks Hazel into getting herself flushed and feverish. He provokes her to attack him long enough to appear sick, then gives her an uppercut to the jaw so that she passes out and he can appear to be watching over the poor sick girl as the “poisoning” holds her incapacitated. Once she regained consciousness, she matches his punch after which they sit side by side, sharing an ice pack for their swollen faces.

Breen’s concern was that the picture’s stunt negated the clean up efforts of the PCA. In between the lines of his reservations about approving Nothing Sacred lies the sentiment that part of Hollywood’s civic duty was to defend the frailty of female characters, even in the face of comedic farce. Moreover, the fact that Breen signed the seal of approval, but still held reservations, illustrates the high level of conservative sentiment toward the

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representation of women and the strict code of conduct Hollywood was willing to endorse for public consumption.

*Nothing Sacred* proved to be a sign of what was to come as screwball comedy was not completely removed from the controversy over representation of women. Moreover, Hollywood sensed the usual yarns might be growing old with movie-goers. The Production Code Administration maintained the strict standards set in 1934, but a changing social climate yet again rendered the Code out of touch by the end of the decade. Breen continued to uphold the explicit demands of the Code, even when Hays began to overturn his decisions.\footnote{The best known example of this is *Gone With the Wind*. Upon the PCA’s original review of the script for the movie, Rhett Butler’s (Clark Gable) famous phrase, “Frankly my dear, I don’t give a damn,” was cut because the Code explicitly prohibited use of the word, damn. Producer David O. Selznick, however, wrote an appeal to Hays, and the line was then approved.} As early as 1937, however, Breen’s rigid enforcement of the Code showed signs of exceeding the desires of the public and most significantly, the studios producing the films. Now, due to the successful efforts of the Hays Office to tone down the sex pictures of the early thirties and the producers’ compliance with PCA mandates, the industry encountered new financial problems. As before, economic factors affected the content of movies; however, what is significant about this point in time, was the manner in which the movie industry began to juggle the situation it had created for itself in terms of self-regulation. Producers had voted on the terms of the Code and had to stick by them. Production heads were again forced to find novel but profitable ways to adhere to the stronger standards of social decency while retaining the entertainment factor surrounding a certain three letter word that audiences still wanted to see in their motion.
pictures. The result was a continuation of the production of screwball comedies but taking greater risks with the roles of female leads.

The PCA loosened its grip on the contents of scripts seeking its seal of approval, but nonetheless kept documentation for correspondence about potentially censurable films. Such arguments attribute the shift back toward more production freedom to a decreased public relations crisis, meaning lessened impact of Catholic criticism over sexual themes from outside the industry. In flirting with these potentially expanded boundaries, popular screwball films began anew to push the limits of acceptable storylines for female protagonists. As Lea Jacobs explains, they “proved to be a constant source of irritation and complaint for the MPPDA precisely because they were so adept at exploiting the sorts of denial mechanisms typically favored by the Production Code Administration.” Some proved to be more problematic that others. The films *The Awful Truth* (1937), *My Favorite Wife* (1940), *Two-Faced Woman* (1941) and *The Palm Beach Story* (1942) earned popular and critical acclaim but also some entanglement with the Church and PCA officials, although the antagonism never reached the same intensity developed in the early Thirties.

One of developments in the latter part of the decade was that screwball comedies became a little more daring, particularly surrounding the presentation of marriage in respect to women’s films. *The Awful Truth* is an example of this production shift out of the new conservativism instituted by the uniquely vulnerable and financially desperate situation created out of the Depression at the close of 1933. Again, the harbinger of change is an Irene Dunne character paired with Cary Grant. The picture opens with Mr.

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and Mrs. Warriner touting the virtues of faith and trust in marriage and in the next breath accusing each other of cheating. They agree to file for divorce and obtain a ninety day trial separation, during which time they begin rebound relationships with second-rate significant others. Unhappy and still in love, they both pretend to still want the divorce while simultaneously sabotaging their budding relationships with respective new fiancés. By the final hour, Lucy and Jerry find themselves stranded in her aunt’s mountain resort home, confessing their love and willingness to change and start their marriage anew.

_The New York Times_ reviewed _The Awful Truth_ as a film that displays “the art of being Gallic, or bedroomish, in a nice way.”\(^2^4\) While this was undoubtedly the consensus of contemporary critics as the picture garnered an Oscar award for director Leo McCarey in 1937, such opinions existed in opposition to those still interested in maintaining the civic and moral duty of films. That which was offensive was the light treatment of marital fidelity. Lucy and Jerry Warriner do file for divorce, but flaunt outside relationships in front of each other while still married. The scenario of legal separation did nothing to quell attacks that the plot gave favorable treatment to adultery. The release of the picture, even with script changes, was a situation that provoked a sticky precedent for the PCA which was to follow a Code that contained no applicable rules to follow for regulating the content of such marital sex comedies.

_My Favorite Wife_ is another seemingly innocent, light romantic comedy which nonetheless developed a PCA file, testing the ways in which brides and wives could and could not be portrayed.\(^2^5\) In it, Ellen Arden (Irene Dunne) comes home after being


\(^{2^5}\) _My Favorite Wife_, Dir. Garson Kanin, Perfs. Irene Dunne, Cary Grant, 88 min., Prod. RKO, 1940.
stranded on an island in the South Pacific for seven years on the day her husband had her pronounced legally dead so that he could be remarried. Determined to reclaim her life, husband, and children, she confronts him as he honeymoons with the new wife. The plot progresses as Cary Grant’s character Nick Arden, struggles to tell the new Mrs. Arden about the old Mrs. Arden. Then he discovers that Ellen was not stranded alone on that island, but with another man- a young, robust, attractive man who wants to marry her.

The picture climaxes in a court room scene in which Grant appears, arrested for bigamy. His second wife annuls her marriage to Nick and leaves. Nick meanwhile contemplates his social reputation due to the scandal of being involved with two women at once, to which Ellen responds by giving him the cold shoulder. The movie concludes as Nick disregards what other people may think and the family reunites at a vacation home in the mountains.

RKO pushed the limits of decency with this film, which caught the attention of the PCA as well as state censors and religious groups. As Ellen and Nick see each other for the first time in seven years, they embrace, kiss, and make quite a scene as the bartender interrupts the public display to remind them, “There’s an ordinance in this state that doesn’t allow necking in bar rooms.” The kiss alone was unthinkable three years previous, but then they make a quick exit and continue behind closed doors, in the room that was their Honeymoon suite when they were wed years ago. This provokes the discomfort of the concierge, worried about reputations, who confronts Nick and makes him leave the room, saying, “We run a first class hotel Mr. Arden, and we do not like to be made a party to an intrigue.” What is important to note, and what became the center of controversy for Breen was the juxtaposition of marital fidelity, adultery, and bigamy in
an otherwise innocent love triangle. Moreover, insinuations to alleged infidelity between Ellen, who became “Eve” to her island “Adam” confuses the question of morality in the film’s message even further. It is a classic screwball scenario in which miscommunication turns innocence into mock sin. It was an example of how Hollywood had shifted to less controversial content and message, and thus, addressed the issues of gender roles more responsibly.

*Two-Faced Woman* was a cross-over vehicle for Greta Garbo, whose name is otherwise attached to tragedies and the fallen woman genre of early thirties “sex films.” This production with established screwball director, George Cukor, centers around the story of a ski instructor, Karin Borg, who marries magazine publisher, Larry Blake (Melvyn Douglas) after the two fall in love over ski lessons. Soon there after, the marriage turns sour, and Karin must compete with another woman for her husband’s affection. She poses as her own seductive twin sister, Katherine, in efforts to win him back. In a series of farcical stunts including a swimming scene in which bathing suits also piqued the discomfort of censors, her act is discovered but with the truth out in the open, the couple reconciles. Katherine disappears as does the other woman, and Karin regains her husband’s full and loyal attention.

Neither Cukor or Garbo were enamored of the film, but it is nonetheless significant due to the contempt it provoked from pro-censorship circles, suggesting that there still existed confining public ideals of appropriate femininity. Garbo’s dual roles as good and evil twins created a scandalous picture from the perspective of the Legion of Decency. The PCA Case File for *Two Faced Woman* contains one newspaper editorial’s

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reaction, summarizing the moral indignation over the representation of wives which came to a head with the release of this picture:

For the last half dozen years, Hollywood has been having a high old time honeymooning. I mean, that with a marriage license, however technical and fictitious, anything goes. We have had a succession of sizzling bedroom sequences that are nearly as wanton as if the dalliance were without benefit of clergy… I reluctantly agree with the Legion of Decency; marriage in a good many films is represented as a one-woman harem and a knowing, smirky quality has been too evident.  

In attempts to extend the limits of screwball comedy, Garbo’s strained comedic performance spurred contemporary reactions illustrative that the allure of the genre’s pictures was the clever allusion to sex- the encoded representation of female sexuality in between the lines of the films. Without the convincing use of playful double-entendre, Garbo’s role simply made a mockery of sacred vows.

A final film in which the screwball comedienne stretches appropriate ideas of femininity through challenging the sacrament of marriage is the 1942 picture, *The Palm Beach Story*. Claudette Colbert plays the role of Gerry Jeffers, the wife of a struggling engineer. The story opens with the manager of their Park Avenue duplex showing their home to a wealthy couple interested in moving in. When the husband finds Gerry upstairs and realizes she cannot afford the rent, he simply rolls out a wad of money and donates $700 dollars to the young beauty’s rescue. This sets in motion the events that evolve throughout the remainder of the film. Joel McCrea as Gerry’s husband, Tom, suspects the worst about how she obtained her newfound riches, which provokes

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discussion of divorce. Gerry then takes off for Palm Beach, where she plans to obtain a divorce, and a new husband willing to finance the airport her husband is trying to build. As screwball luck would have it, she finds one of the wealthiest men in the world, who soon proposes. All the while, Tom arrived in Palm Beach in the hopes of winning her back and the couple realizes in the end that love is more important than money and leave Palm Beach together.

The controversy over this film is Colbert’s portrayal of a woman who views marriage in a cynical, opportunistic way that she terms “practical” but religious groups termed irreverent. In terms of how the Code shaped women’s roles, it was close to a revocation of the agreement on the part of producers, who took their moral and civic responsibilities too lightly once again. Throughout most of the film, Gerry illustrates the antithesis of acceptable femininity, evident in the controversy _The Palm Beach Story_ evoked. She sees no fault in using her physical attributes to get ahead, which she tries to explain to Tom: “You have no idea what a long-legged gal can do without doing anything.” She chastises him for being a noble, honest, and hardworking provider instead of coming by money with easier methods: “Don’t you ever learn to be practical? Don’t you ever learn that the greatest men in the world have told lies and let things be misunderstood if it was useful to them? Didn’t you ever hear of a campaign promise?” She shamelessly suggests to her husband that she would make a better sister than a wife because she cannot sew or cook. Immediately after, Gerry seduces the wealthy J.D. Hackensacker, III into believing the opposite as he delights in her presence, saying, “The homely virtues are so hard to find these days- a woman who can sew and cook and bake— even if she doesn’t have to.” While Breen commented on the film, warning about the
opinions of civic and religious groups which “have let it be known that stories centering around the theme of a light treatment of marriage and divorce… have been a source of serious complaint,” perhaps that which exists as most problematic is that a female character embodies such treatment. It was important to Breen and the PCA that Gerry reformed by the picture’s conclusion and the message sent to audiences that she was only fooling herself before, and never fell out of love with her morally impeccable husband who patiently waited for Gerry to find her way back to him.

In a letter from David O. Selznick to John Hay Whitney of United Artists, Selznick articulated a growing resentment of how the conservative turn changed Hollywood. Selznick, in a conflict with Breen over a film entitled Rebecca in September of 1939 writes, “I think we would become heroes… for having led the fight against so insane and inane and outmoded a Code as that under which the industry is now struggling. The whole damned Code becomes doubly onerous now that we are in danger of losing our foreign market.”

In bowing to domestic financial pressures over decency in films, the foreign market began to wane. The international scene was already an increasing concern among Americans, including American businesses, as Hitler’s forces became more powerful overseas, and the U.S. faced crucial decisions concerning involvement in the European theater. Studio executives also began to contemplate Hollywood’s position in the mix. These sentiments express perspectives that lay under the surface of the light entertainment demanded by the strictures of the Code- sentiments that as Chapter Three reveals, manifested with the continued presence of Mae West’s

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satirical indictments of the love story, and gritty sexual realism of the fallen woman melodrama. The underlying issues manifested in conflict over the representation of women were important means to adjust to the changing roles of women during the Depression, but they were also veiled controversies over social control shaping the greater society as a whole through the powerful medium of mass cultural communication.
CHAPTER THREE

NEW TWIST ON AN OLD STORY

When mass church organizations start after you, you haven’t a leg to stand on.

--Jack Warner

Ultimately, the Hays Office was successful in its efforts to clean up Hollywood, making cinema space safer for the moral well-being of filmgoers. State censor boards and the Legion of Decency continued to split the hairs of specific phrases and scenes, but the Production Code gained strength and served as a formidable enough threat. For the most part, women’s films now adhered to showing the female members of audiences their proper places through examples of morally sound screen stories that made no mistake of right and wrong conduct for the ladies of the screen, who miraculously began to make all the “right” choices. Whether general audience opinions viewed the changes as putting a wet towel on a good time remains unknown, but the changes were unmistakable.

What Chapter Two addresses is that the development of a new genre was one of the ways a conservative shift in views of gender and sexuality in American society translated to a corresponding shift on the screen and that Hollywood mirrored dominant social attitudes about women’s roles. Lobbyists wanted motion picture production to represent their views of acceptable gender activity and they were successful. This

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chapter takes a look at another particularly revealing manifestation of the push for Hollywood to clean up its act and redeem the “shameful” heroines of the silver screen.

Alongside the creation of a new film cycle (screwball comedy), old ones were also modified to suit the changing views of appropriate femininity. This chapter examines how films that had previously been the hotbed for sexual liberty and “bad girl” appeal, the comedies of Mae West and the fallen woman films, changed their tunes to keep up with the times. West’s comedienne comedy and fallen woman films did not dramatically disappear at the inception of the 1934 Production Code. Rather, they were forced to tame their evil ways. The studios modified the film production cycles that featured the celebrated sexuality of Mae West’s comedienne comedy and the sympathetic portrayals of brazen female sexuality in fallen woman films. The results as shall be discussed were films that started out the same but presented endings that were noticeably changed.

Robert Sklar separates pre- and post-1934 Production Code Hollywood as “the Golden Age of Turbulence and the Golden Age of Order.” What this implies is that as the decade of the Thirties wore on, Hollywood survived the Depression by finding peace out of the battles for public morality, and became prosperous in part because the industry adapted to the moral dictates of a well-organized demographic. Before 1934 the voices of protest were not strong enough to give the Code teeth, after the industry had suffered the worst of the Depression in 1933, the Hays Office as well as state censors and their civilian supporters were able to assert themselves more stiffly and the tame pictures of the latter half of the decade reflect such. Some scholars suggests that the “official”

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histories of the Production Code, from men in power such as Hays himself and Raymond Moley, a prominent member of Franklin D. Roosevelt’s Brain Trust, present a sentimentalized story about a chain of events as suitable for the screen as any of the scripts appearing at the time. Richard Maltby writes, “Their version of events adheres to the requirements of a familiar early Depression Hollywood story, in which the industry appears as a fallen woman, led by economic hardship into immoral behavior and a fall from grace.” He continues with the parable to explain that the stories were true to the form of a post-1934 yarn: “There is a happy ending when Hollywood, the fallen woman, is rescued from sin and federal censorship by virtuous hero Joe Breen riding at the head of the Catholic Legion of Decency.”

Further examination of the period reveals quite the opposite. Hollywood was not saved from its sinful portrayals of indecent women; rather, Hollywood played the role of paternal savior, forced by economic expediency and the threat of boycott to show these tragic leading ladies the error of their ways and then the righteous light.

So who was it that shone this bright, burning light? It is unrealistic to assume all of society held the same views. It was a specific sector of American society that was holding the cards and holding Hollywood to the flame. As was stated at the beginning of this study, an integral factor in understanding representations of women is economic expediency. Box office numbers dramatically decreased in a relatively short span of time in 1933. Artistic integrity and the move to realism that had occurred at the beginning of the decade were compromised by the men in charge of the purse strings, men who did not

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see individual films, but trends and numbers. What this means is that those individuals making the films in Hollywood endured heightened pressure from the company and studio executives in New York, who in turn had to deal with the pressure of losing outside financial support for their products and successful Catholic-lead boycotts of large numbers of films in major cities where the studios could be economically hurt by the impact. In order to discuss Hollywood’s reaction to business concerns as manifest in the heightened control of material that could be released to the public, the men who were responsible for tightening the screws must first be examined.

Some suggest that Hollywood existed as a “controlled institution”—that the films Hollywood produced and exhibited were wholly controlled by forces much stronger than writers, directors, and even producers. Tino Balio explains Hollywood as being controlled by three groups: state and municipal censorship boards, pressure groups, and self-regulation through the Production Code Administration. While the first and third groups have already been touched upon in previous chapters, the second group deserves attention as this collective constituency was responsible for the increased participation of regulatory groups. Pressure groups are unique in their efforts; they existed as the link between the government (state and municipal censorship boards) and the industry (the Production Code Administration). Pressure groups and their demands were the catalyst of conservative change. By pushing for extended federal governmental control over film content and message in representations of gender and sexuality among other perceived

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vices, they tested the resolve of the industry and the efficacy of the MPPDA’s role as a successful, internal controlling body.

The most prominent pressure group was the Legion of Decency. The Legion began with a group of Catholic bishops, urged by Joseph Breen, who sought widespread support for the condemnation of immoral pictures. From 1929 on, Breen had been collaborating off the record with men such as Martin Quigley, Wilfrid Parsons, and Daniel Lord about organizing a public response to objectionable films. Their efforts officially began in April of 1934 as a collaborated committee. Called the Episcopal Committee on Motion Pictures, this group of men recruited the Legion of Decency to carry out what American bishops began planning since 1933. The goal was to switch tactics. Rather than act as a select group of reformers lobbying for increased state censorship and implementation of federal censorship, these men focused on expanding their base by creating a national organization of concerned citizens. After the NRA’s movie industry code denied any responsibility in the censorship of films, these self-appointed moral guardians knew the only way to make movie moguls pay attention to their concerns was by attacking the concerns of the moguls, which was money. The organization led a large-scale boycott of movies condemned according to Catholic mandate. If Hollywood would not acquiesce to government threats, the Legion was going to make studios do so because of economic expediency. Catholic bishops led the Legion of Decency in the censorship fight; however, politicians and clubwomen also rallied to the cause. The difference was that these leaders now attracted popular support because of the Depression.
The Legion of Decency initially spread throughout Catholic dioceses across the country, urging parishioners to sign petitions and pledges promising to abstain from attending any films the Church had blacklisted. Some accounts record that eleven million people signed and participated in the boycott. Moreover, by the time the boycott was in full swing, it was no longer just Catholics. Protestant and Jewish organizations also participated in the efforts to take justice and morality into their own hands and signatures. As Sklar suggests, “What could the studios do? Having lost millions of dollars in 1933, with attendance dropping to a five-year low, they found themselves in no position to ignore so massive a threat of box-office desertion.”

More significant even was the role played by individual Catholics who had been mobilizing an offensive since mid-1933. Once Daniel Lord and Martin Quigley, the authors of the Code, broke ties with the Hays Office, they drew a line in the sand. They now viewed the Code as useless, but believed that the industry had had numerous chances to redeem itself. It had failed. Therefore, they owed the moguls no more allegiance or leniency. Hays attempted to convince Lord that it was economics that had producers in a state of financial panic. The films they continued to produce were not merely blatant refusals to follow the Code; they were efforts by the studios to keep from going out of business. For Lord, it was too little too late, and as far as he was concerned

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the situation was hopeless and he had been used. The industry and its movies could go “merrily to hell.”

It was this complex mix of push and pull factors into which the Legion of Decency stepped that ultimately created out of the motion picture industry a mouthpiece with which to endorse and promote traditional views of American morality. The views for which highbrow defenders of American purity and work ethic had been fighting since the first censorship debates at the turn of the century—views that had taken a backseat to the grit, rawness, and dirt existent in motion pictures during the latter part of the twenties and early years of the thirties. They were views that, in the context of the events of 1933-1934, represented a conservative backlash aimed to whip lewd and bawdy pictures back into acceptable shape. Studio producers and distributors were fighting wars on many fronts. Financial investors also greatly influenced the changes occurring in Hollywood.

Thus, another part of the success of the reformers was not the bishops and clergymen were overwhelmingly powerful in their own right in the eyes of movie moguls; but rather, their connections to bankers and financiers put enormous financial pressure on the studios before audiences even had a chance to boycott. Significantly, outside financial backers had a stake in Hollywood now more than ever because Wall Street bank firms supplied the capital to most of the studios when they made the move to sound. The cost of new soundproof stages and equipment, and the restructuring of the physical space of studios were much more than the studios could afford. Moreover, outside financiers funded the construction of grand-scale luxurious first-run theaters in all the big cities on the east coast, especially in New York, which showcased the new

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technology and novelty of motion pictures endowed with sound. The studio heads gave up financial autonomy for the chance at big returns, and once Quigley and Lord spread the word to Bishop John Cantwell of Los Angeles, and he in turn spread the word to lay Catholic bankers that the Church was going to condemn pictures their money funded, they were quick to address the Hollywood establishment. Men such as Dr. A. H. Giannini, president of the Bank of America in Los Angeles responded swiftly, notifying their Hollywood clients that if they went against the wishes of the Church, they would no longer supply the much needed funding for production costs.  

A final consideration is that Hays himself felt more personal pressure to tighten his reigns not just because of the growing lobby of religious organizations, but also because he felt he had lost his influence in Washington. Will Hays had been trying to formulate order within the motion picture industry for over a decade. Since 1922, there had been endless negotiations over how the Production Code was to be interpreted, followed, and enforced. He had yet to please all the forces pulling to shape the movies that hit the theaters. All along, in terms of his role involving censorship, for him the goal was to avoid federal intervention in the private business of Hollywood. He was successful in staving off the creation of any more state censorship boards after the defeat of the Massachusetts bill, but now he was dealing with the growing potential threat of federal censorship restrictions. Hays was an intimate in Republican circles but with Hoover’s resounding defeat in 1932 and the election of the Democratic people’s champion, Franklin D. Roosevelt, he feared he had lost his trump card against the forces pushing for that federal intervention in Hollywood business. This, combined with FDR’s

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NRA which called for strengthening the relationship and cooperation between business and government in order to save the economy, left Hays with an unprecedented sense of urgency about now being the time for change or he might be out of a job as well.

Thus, groups of reformers who had lobbied the industry for decades were able to use the instability of the industry and weakened financial autonomy to make their moral attacks more successful now than ever before. While these groups mainly targeted film production cycles and the moral values of certain genres, they also aimed their sights on one individual whose name both then and now is perpetually dropped as a prime suspect in pushing the limits of appropriate gender and sexuality in film. Mae West earned fans all over the world but also made many enemies with her films released before 1934. While she released numerous films after 1934, all of which could be analyzed through their continued problems with the censors, two in particular reveal the extent to which her edges had been forcibly dulled and her devil-may-care characters forced into their proper place. *Belle of the Nineties* and *Klondike Annie* are two films that exemplify the conservative shift in views of women that invaded the world of film and even changed Mae West’s unique brand of suggestive sexuality. Her characters, revered for their gender-bending sexual independence, retained their wit and humor, but began to find consciences and a new desire to look out for others to set things morally right.

The first film, *Belle of the Nineties* (1934) stars Mae West as Ruby Carter and an entourage of leading men. Another period film set in the 1890s, the story surrounds

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Ruby, a vaudeville singer from St. Louis, who is in a committed relationship with the latest boxing sensation, Tiger Kid, played by Roger Pryor. Worried that Tiger is in love with Ruby to the point of distraction, Tiger’s manager tricks him into thinking Ruby has been seeing another man. Although she has been faithful, the manager propositions to Ruby that if she truly loves Tiger, she will not disclose the truth and let him focus on his boxing career. She promptly leaves to start a new life in New Orleans, performing at Ace Lamont’s Sensation House. After she rejects the sexual advances of her boss, Ace (John Miljan), in jealousy and indignation he then plans a robbery of the diamond jewelry heaped upon her by the wealthy businessman/suitor, Brooks Claybourne (John Mack Brown).

Opening in true Mae West style, *Belle of the Nineties* begins as crowds of people file into a theater decorated with a banner that boasts, “Here! The Most Talked About Woman in America.” Indeed both her character, Ruby Carter, and West herself were one and the same in this respect. However, with the heat of the Hays Office watching her films closely, this one does depart from standard fare. As she decides to give the diamonds back to Brooks Claybourne, a rich businessman who has fallen in love with her, Ruby remarks to her maid that it will hurt her but it is the right thing to do. This climactic scene marks the difference in comparison to those that were produced before the tightening of the Production Code the same year it premiered. The infamous gold-digger of old had seen the error of her ways.

What is interesting and significant in terms of the weight of gender roles in the public’s eye is that, while Mae West’s type of role changed and began to distinguish between wrong and right, her physical sexuality was not altered at all. In fact, the
original theatrical trailer advertises *Belle of the Nineties* by promoting her physical attractiveness, “She has an hour glass figure... and makes every hour count!” The film develops with a moral message as the villain, Ace Lemont, is killed at the hand of Ruby’s unintentional justice, Ruby returns the diamond jewelry to Brooks, and marries Tiger Kid, who was her love in the beginning of the film. Adolph Zukor of Paramount as well as the Hays Office allowed the sexually provocative one liners and suggestive body language for which West was by this point notorious. The character of Ruby Carter is a forerunner to the image that still exists today as film heroines embody the public perception of ideal womanhood: beautiful, sexy, tough, smart, and possessing a heart of gold.

Perhaps the best example of how the Hays Office tamed the wild institution that was Mae West as best they could is the vehicle, *Klondike Annie*. The film begins in San Francisco circa 1890, in Chinatown, at the gambling establishment of Chinese prince, Chan Lo. White aristocrats gossip about whether Rose Carlton, “The Frisco Doll,” is married to Chan Lo, but all they know is that he is wildly jealous of men—especially white men—coming near her. After a year, Rose decides she has had enough of her prison and risks her life to escape her existence as a kept concubine. She escapes on a boat bound for Alaska, where she meets the captain of the ship, Bull Bracket, played by Victor McLaglen. Upon stopping in Seattle, Bull receives word that his intriguing passenger is none other that the Doll, wanted for murder, but it is too late, he has already fallen in love and vows to protect her.

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Along the way, they stop in Vancouver and pick up a woman named Sister Annie Alden, on her way to a settlement house in Nome. During the harsh sea voyage, Sister Annie and Rose become close friends. Annie falls ill, and Rose takes care of her, passing her time by reading the book of “Settlement Maxims” Annie gave to her by which to model her life. Rose starts to have a change of heart. When Annie dies, she reflects, “I don’t know what you’ve done for me all these days we’ve been together, but I’m beginning to see things different now.” When they arrive in Nome, the police board the boat looking for the Doll. Rose makes a split second decision to become Sister Annie Alden, assuming her position at the settlement house and tackles the task of saving the rugged Klondike souls. Rose as Annie reforms the rough Alaskan town and makes the settlement house a success. While she’s there, she becomes torn between the love of two men, Bull and the Policeman, Jack Forrest. In the end, Rose decides to resist hiding out in Alaska even as a saved woman. She decides she must do the right thing by going back to San Francisco with Bull, with faith in the truth, that she will be able to clear her name from the crime of killing Chan Lo in self-defense.

This film came out in 1936 after one of West’s most formidable battles with the Production Code Administration and particularly Joe Breen, who viewed West as a serious impediment to his otherwise successful reorganization of Hollywood’s morals. Jill Watts chronicles the climactic war between Breen and Paramount over one of their most lucrative stars. Basically, Breen toned down the characterization of The Frisco Doll on both ends of the moral spectrum, for he felt that a hauntingly pristine, saint-like Mae West character was just as bad (if not worse) than her role as a prostitute. It would be the biggest outrage and a joke on female purity, a mockery of Christianity. At any rate,
Breen forbade Rose Carlton to go near religion for fear it would become markedly burlesque: “While the original plot showed the redemption of Frisco Doll, censors refused to permit the moral regeneration of West’s imagined self.”\(^{11}\) Watts continues to retell the story of Breen’s personal vendetta as he demanded her character could not be a prostitute or a missionary. Instead she became a blues singer and a social worker. The mission became a settlement house. The book she carried was not a Bible, it was a book called, “Settlement Maxims;” the songs she sang were not hymns but blues songs that promoted temperance. She did not preach, she gave personal testimony and she advised.

The Hays Office may have been satisfied with the modifications and the final product at least, until the public responded by lauding her humorous film about sex and religion. Some critics were immediately indignant. One in particular was publisher and media magnate William Randolph Hearst. A *Time Magazine* review of *Klondike Annie* quotes the Hearst New York *American* of the previous week: “The attention of the churches, the women’s clubs, the various state censors, the state legislatures and the Congress of the United States is called to the fact that Mae West has produced another screen play which she wrote herself…”\(^{12}\) Hearst’s self-proclaimed boycott of all things Mae West scrapped advertisements for *Klondike Annie* and moreover included an editorial campaign against it. In her autobiography, West reflected on the situation with characteristic wit and humor. To Hearst’s request for Congress to take action in respect to her, she writes, “The nearest Congress came to that was almost naming twin lakes,


\(^{12}\) *Time* 27 (9 March 1936): 44.
round ones, after me in a national park.”\textsuperscript{13} Hearst’s editorials proclaimed, “It [\textit{Klondike Annie}] is an IMMORAL and INDECENT film… The story, scenes and dialog are basically libidinous and sensual… Decent people will protest against… showing a white woman in the role, even inferred, of consort to a Chinese vice lord.”\textsuperscript{14}

West quotes figures that showed in 1935, only one person in the whole country had a bigger salary than hers: one William Randolph Hearst to the tune of only $19,167 for the year. While this was an astronomical figure to most Americans during the 1930s, it was a relatively small margin that separated her annual income of $480,833 from his $500,000. “No wonder,” she comments, “Mr. Hearst and his high clean living moral values was writing editorials against me. He hated to see a woman in his class.”\textsuperscript{15} While Hearst’s reactions to the film also showed evidence that moral outrage over \textit{Klondike Annie} also stemmed from issues of race, the whole public drama was but one more illustration of West’s embodiment of the strong, independent, and threatening presence that defied appropriate notions of gender.

By 1934’s end, the fallen woman film and its heroines also underwent significant changes in order to appeal to the conservative shift in dominant views of appropriate gender and sexuality. So much that some authors such as Tino Balio suggest the cycle had run its course. Since the late Twenties, the attack producers had to deal with was the “fall.” If the female lead’s transgressions were great, did she fall sufficiently enough? Was she punished and were audiences sufficiently shown that evil does not pay? Men


\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Time} 27 (9 March 1936): 61.

such as Martin Quigley and Daniel Lord felt that by 1933 the answer was a resounding no on all counts, which is why they chose to lead the mobilization of Catholic leaders in the United States to actively speak against Hollywood’s state of immorality, which included brazen, shameless ladies. Thus, the question of the fall was even more pressing after the Catholic Legion of Decency campaign against these women’s films. With such emphasis and scrutiny, the fallen woman film remained, but with a catch. Yes, the fallen woman must pay for her transgressions and the conclusion must contain a resolution that sees her redeemed, but Hollywood also created out of the controversy a new spin on the old yarn to promote more conservative gender roles in respect to its fairer sex. The films Alice Adams, The Shopworn Angel, and Kitty Foyle illustrate some of the ways that an old genre adapted to heightened standards of moral purity.

The success of Alice Adams in 1935 as a fallen woman film suggests that fallen women had truly lost their edge. The softened story of a poor girl who falls for a society man stars Katherine Hepburn as Alice Adams and Fred MacMurray as Arthur Miller. This film, with PCA certification no. 1101, indicated that the shift in views of gender had infiltrated the melodrama. Hepburn, who had endured a boom and bust cycle in terms of her own acting career, had been deemed “box-office poison” at one point, but never a vamp or overtly sexual actress. Rather, her mannerisms and air of respectability were custom-made for the fallen woman makeover enforced by the Hays Office through the Production Code Administration.

Alice Adams takes place in the small town of South Renford, during its 75th Jubilee Year. It is a time of celebration in the town and everyone who is anyone will be

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at the Palmer Party. The film opens with a series of scenes that introduce Alice and her family. She is a hopeless romantic and eternal optimist. Alice is not bothered by her five and dime compact, picking violets from the park to make her own corsage, or wearing a dress from two years ago. She does not let the fact that her brother, Walter, is forced to take her to the party get her down either. At the party, she incessantly puts on a show, always trying to impress the social elites. She keeps trying and trying to impress, to get any man to notice her and ask her for a dance. She sees another girl fighting off three men at once, wanting to dance with her, just like Alice had pretended to do in front of the mirror. Then the debonair Arthur Russell appears and asks her to dance. It is a dream come true until she hears that upon sending Arthur to find her brother, he found Walter in the cloak room shooting dice, a horribly unsophisticated activity at this party. That’s it for Alice; she goes home and breaks down into tears.

The movie continues as storylines develop around Alice and her family, and Alice and Arthur’s budding relationship. Her family stays in trouble with her father laid up unable to work and looking at the prospect of going back to his dead end job as a sales clerk for the wealthy, prominent Mr. Lamb when he can. Her mother continues to bemoan her father’s failures and her brother gets involved with disreputable types of people, stealing money from the Lamb Company in the end, because he knew a guy in trouble who said he was good for the money and left him with the scandal. Alice and Arthur become closer, they spend much time on her porch (never inside as she is ashamed of her house). They are out to dinner one night, however, when Alice becomes “sadly happy.” She tells Arthur she’ll miss their summer nights together when they end. She knows that the society people will get to him, talking badly about her. Her dreams of
happiness with Arthur do end the night she invites him into her house for a family dinner and it turns out awkward and contrived. She comes to realize who she is and that she will never be like the elites, but she is finally accepting of her family and herself, flaws and all. The twist is that in the end, Arthur comes to the same realization, despite the rumors, and he confesses his love for her as the film fades out.

The spin that *Alice Adams* contains which previous fallen woman films do not is a reversal on the story about the class-rise of ambitious girls. Significantly, 1935 saw the creation of jobs and relief for working-class Americans throughout the country. The CCC employed half a million young men, the WPA provided direct relief to states, Social Security was created to support the aging population. Women such as Eleanor Roosevelt and Frances Perkins enabled women to have their own work camps. Also in 1935, the Wagner Act empowered unions with a new legal basis upon which workers could better stand up for their rights. The stigma of failure and disillusionment was waning, as the country began to come to terms with the Depression it faced. People were coming to terms with themselves. Throughout the picture, Alice’s mother reiterates how it is a pity that Alice is so young and pretty but the young men don’t court her like they do the other girls because she is poor and has no family background. Although her intentions are well-meaning, Alice’s mother places an all too familiar emphasis on material wealth and possessions. The difference here and one of the reasons that could explain why this novel adaptation fared well with 1935 audiences and critics is that Alice does not “fall” per se as a female lead typically would in an early fallen woman yarn. Instead, Alice blunders and makes painfully conspicuous grasps at the life of the rich and important. It is not seen as attractive or appealing, but embarrassing. Hepburn’s role as Alice would
convince young girls with aspirations like her to quit while they were ahead. It would be quite discouraging to the gold-digging myth, that young, beautiful girls can get anything by using their allure.

By 1938, Roosevelt had been reelected and the country was in another downward Depression spiral. Unemployment had risen again, up to 19 percent from the previous year’s 14 percent and the economy took another hit. Sixty-four million people identified themselves with religious affiliation. One hundred thirty licensed radio stations had banned even the mention of Mae West’s name. The moral wellbeing of the country, including film audiences, was seemingly still at stake. With these developments in mind, lobbyists still expected the PCA to ensure that if fallen woman films continued to be produced, they must sufficiently punish the fallen women who lead immoral screen lives. An interesting issue which began to take precedence in the demands made upon the motion picture industry to clean up its films and earn the PCA certified seals is that of punishment. The message of punishment for crimes and illicit sexual behavior became even more important than that of redemption. This is the environment in which *The Shopworn Angel* came out, three years after *Alice Adams*. The film situated its female lead in a love triangle, but it had an aptly appropriate socially conscious approach.  

*The triangle was a familiar story to the fallen woman genre, however, in the plot of *The Shopworn Angel*, the inner turmoil faced by the protagonist occurs in the context of war, and with her realizing that there are larger issues than her own personal wants and desires that she has a chance to impact. The film is set in 1917 as the United States enters the War. Men all across the country enlist and scenes are shown of young soldiers* 

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everywhere marching in the streets. Daisy (Margaret Sullavan) is introduced in bed, hung over, and not at all impressed with the parade outside, or the band playing patriotic marching songs. She is the star performer of Sam Bailey’s dance show, but rarely attends rehearsals. The chorus girls introduce audiences to the way the operation works. Daisy and the boss, Sam Bailey are together, so she does as she pleases. She is presented as a stubborn, late-night partying sophisticate who talks about men the way a male bachelor talks about women: cold and matter-of-factly about the negotiation of power. Emotions do not factor in for Daisy. She talks to her maid about men, saying, “Why do you want to get married anyway? The day a man knows he’s got you then you haven’t got him.”

Sam, played by Walter Pidgeon, comes to see her and they talk about the War. He calls it a “terrifying hysteria” that has hit the country as he looks down from the penthouse that he has presumably set up for her to look at the soldiers marching in the street. She is unimpressed and irritated because wartime means only one lump of sugar in her coffee instead of three. She calls the soldiers suckers, to which Sam tells her just wait, “You’ll be knitting socks with the rest of them before it’s over.”

Bill Pettigrew, played by James Stewart, is introduced down in the parade, looking up with his mouth wide open at all the skyscrapers. A cowboy from Texas, he is the dreamer, who would rather make up stories about having a sweetheart rather than actually having a girl like most soldiers do. Bill says he does not want a girl like the one he sees at the soda shop, who is nice to a soldier while she’s with him, but the minute he’s gone, she just finds another fellow to sweet talk. Daisy encounters Bill for the first time when her driver almost runs him over as he stands in the middle of the street one night. A policeman makes her give him a ride to his camp, and she is rude, disinterested
and off-putting, but Bill is enchanted. He pretends Daisy is his girl and tells his friends in the army that that they have been sweethearts since they were children. When one of his buddies figures out he’s lying, they force Bill into a situation where he must introduce them to Daisy after a show. She catches on and decides to help Bill out; she goes along with the story. They become close and, because of Bill, Daisy starts to change. She begins to see her life as shallow and unfulfilling, and she starts to want more than fun especially in her relationship with Sam. Meanwhile, Bill has fallen in love with her, just as she and Sam confess their love to each other. In the end, Daisy tells Sam she owes her new outlook to Bill, and that she feels almost like a mother to him. When Bill’s unit gets called up, he sneaks off the base to see her for one more night. She realizes that she exists as an important dream for Bill. He is in love with the idea she represents and when forced to choose between marrying Sam and Bill, she chooses Bill. It is her punishment that she cannot be with Sam and must become a faithful wife to Bill, knitting those socks after all. Daisy thinks it is more important for Bill to have the hope having a wife would bring to a soldier shipped off to war than it is for her to be with Sam. In the end, Bill does get killed in the war, and the movie fades out as Daisy cries over the tragedy with a heart she previously had not possessed.

_The Shopworn Angel_ is particularly useful in studying the shifted, conservative roles women began to play. The story positions Daisy in a love triangle, in which she cannot just pick her true love. She must take an even higher road as part of her patriotic duty, and she is characterized to have experienced a change within herself so fully that she does feel it is her duty to live up to her responsibilities during this war. She loves Sam, but understands the duty she would be performing in her self-sacrificing marriage to
Bill before he leaves for France to fight on the front lines. Daisy had never felt a purpose in life; the life that she had been living was decadent and luxurious but cold, fun but impersonal. All that changed when she met Bill, a real flesh and blood man not just a nameless faceless soldier. She saw that she could make a difference in Bill’s life. Ironically, she realizes at the film’s end, she has foregone her true self and love for Sam in order to make Bill’s dream of having a wife and someone to come home to true, before he goes off to war.

Author Lea Jacobs argues that one of the most significant contrasts in the production of fallen woman films before and after 1934 is the issue of class-rise. In her book, *The Wages of Sin*, she explains that before, the fallen-woman as gold-digger made the transition to high-society smoothly and with ease, but this was one of the biggest issues that needed to be addressed as far as the Legion of Decency was concerned. They argued to Joseph Breen that it sent a dangerously wrong message to female audiences. If they saw that the kept woman or prostitute found riches and happiness in high society with such ease through illicit relations with men it would be detrimental to society. It mattered little whether or not the fallen women heroines found love or not. Class-rise by such means was unacceptable in any script as far as the conservative lobbyists for a change in the representation of women saw it. While it was impossible for the Production Code Administration to enforce such absolute censorship of popular film, *Kitty Foyle* exists as an example of the compromise Joe Breen’s negotiations struck between the defenders of the moral well-being of moviegoers and those among the studios who produced as much as they could to placate both sides. Like the character,

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Alice Adams, Kitty Foyle also exists as an anti-gold-digger of sorts, a working-class heroine whom society teaches about the right and wrong way to approach love and relationships.

The opening sequence of *Kitty Foyle* presents a group of shop girls debating the importance of men in their lives. Some think independence is more important. Others say they don’t care, they want a man and they don’t care who knows it. The woman arguing for independence says, “After all, what’s the difference between men bachelors and girl bachelors?” In her opening line, Kitty Foyle, played by Ginger Rogers, is not fooled by bold words and answers the question, “Men bachelors are that way on purpose.” As soon as the audience is introduced to Kitty, she accepts the proposal of a doctor named Mark (James Craig) who asks her to marry him that night. He asks her to meet him at St. Timothy’s Hospital at 12 o’clock so they can be wed. Upon arriving at her room to pack, she finds Wyn Strafford, played by Dennis Morgan. He is the long-time love of her life, come back to ask her to sail away with him to live in Buenos Aires.

The one catch is that he is married. He tells her that he cannot get a divorce, but he has broken away for good. He wants to be with Kitty forever. She gives in and tells Wyn to take her with him. They make plans to sail away, at midnight that night. As she begins to pack, Kitty picks up a snow globe, with a little girl on a sled inside. When she turns around to face herself in the mirror, her conscience comes to life, appearing as a talking image of herself in the mirror, telling her it is a pretty unsatisfactory role she is preparing to play. Her conscience asks her if she really wants to be ‘that woman’ for the rest of her life. “Married people face things together, but you won’t be married,” she tells

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herself. She wrestles with justifying how her illicit love with Wyn is better than a piece of paper with Mark.

This sets in motion a series of separate flashbacks about her life connected by voice over scenes in which Kitty contemplates the most important decision of her life. The first flashback is of Kitty at age fifteen. She lives in Philadelphia with her Pop and they talk about her fascination with the Main Liners and their formal annual Assembly. Her Pop equates it to the Cinderella story, which he thinks poisons the minds of young girls, making them “dissatisfied with honest shoe clerks and book keepers.” As her Pop sees it, Cinderella and the Prince come from two different worlds and a love like that just does not happen in the real world. Kitty tells him, “You know what I think Pop? I think you’re wrong.” As the voice over points out, it is the exact same line she is using with herself in the present to tell herself she can be happy running away with Wyn.

With the next flashback Kitty recalls how she met Wyn. He gave her a job as his stenographer, working at his magazine company. They fall in love, and Kitty prepares herself for Wyn to ask her to marry him. Her Pop tries to warn her, telling her Main Liners like Wyn always end up marrying one of their own. When the magazine folds, it becomes obvious to Kitty that Wyn has no intention of marrying her. After her Pop died, she moved to New York and “joined the New York white-collar brigade,” working at a cosmetics company. Here that she met Mark, who she began to see regularly until one night, on the eve of the Assembly in Philadelphia, Wyn comes to her door, and sweeps her off her feet with flowers and dancing all night. They rekindle their love and get married. Upon returning to Philadelphia to tell his family, however, they began to make plans to change her, to mold her into a Main Liner and an acceptable wife for Wyn.
Kitty realizes that she cannot live her life and he cannot live hers, so she runs away, goes back to New York and files for a divorce.

Flash forward a little more, and Kitty finds out she is pregnant, but Wyn is to be married to someone else. She decides to keep her baby without telling him and her conscience speaks again through the swirl of the snow globe, saying “This is what women want. It isn’t men, not really. It’s something down inside them that’s the future. That was it, the future.” With the next flashback, though, her baby is stillborn. The film flashes forward five more years and Kitty has been sent to Philadelphia to open a branch of the cosmetics store. On her last day there, Wyn’s wife and son come into the store. Kitty gives the ring Wyn had given her to his son. She tells him it is a secret present for him to give to his daddy. With that she moves back to New York and forgets her past with Wyn, which leads to her present decision between Mark and Wyn.

“There you are kid,” her reflection sums up, “There’s the record. Mark’s waiting for you at St. Timothy’s and here’s Wyn again. Think fast, Captain Foyle.” The bellhop comes up to take her bags and it is time to leave. At the end she gets in her cab and tells the doorman that she will be leaving permanently, and asks of him one more request. That he tells the man who will be coming to the building later that night that, “I admire him very much and I always will and that I’ll never forget him. Tell him that I’ll always love him in a very special way and that I’m going to be married tonight.” Then she tells the cab driver to take her to St. Timothy’s Hospital.

Kitty Foyle was given PCA certification seal number 6639 after much negotiation of the script. The film was based on a novel by Christopher Morley, and the literary story did not exist as wholly appropriate for the silver screen. The omissions and changes
facilitated by Joseph Breen further illustrate the ways in which Hollywood molded its pictures to appropriately represent the conservative expectations for women during the studio era and how the Code dictated an alteration of women’s roles. In the novel, Kitty and Wyn never married and Kitty aborted her illegitimate baby. Both of which were unacceptable to the Hays Office, and the existing film reflects the only way it could be produced, and tenuously at that. Breen described the method by which such a fallen woman film should present potentially offensive material. He explains illicit sexual relations, if present, must be shown as wrong. There can be no mistaking this and punishment must be doled out for transgressors. The story audiences saw legitimated the baby, but sent the message of punishment regardless, because the relationship Kitty had with Wyn was ultimately illicit and immoral, causing her much pain and suffering. The final product suggested that even though Kitty had loved Wyn there really was no choice at all, that marriage to Mark was the only attractive option.

Another important aspect of Kitty Foyle, which emphasizes gender expectations manifest in film production, is a scene in which Kitty and Wyn dance at a formal ballroom party. It is indicative of the greater weight place upon film message than specific aspects of its content. After Wyn publicly steals a kiss on the dance floor, he remarks at how she likes to dance. She tells him, “All women do; it’s good training.” This he does not understand and she elaborates by explaining that dancing is “the first way a girl learns what a man is going to do before he does it.” He laughs at the suggestion. That there is no record of discontent with this exchange suggests that moral

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20 Joseph Breen to Joseph Nolan, March 27, 1940, Kitty Foyle, MPPDA Case Files, Academy Library.

21 Joseph Breen to Joseph Nolan, March 27, 1940, Kitty Foyle, MPPDA Case Files, Academy Library.
guardians were more concerned with general impressions films left with female audiences rather than details imbedded within the content. In this case, after a decade of declining marriage rates during the Depression, a movie like *Kitty Foyle* underscores that marriage should be the most important decision for a woman, and that the “Cinderella story” is only a fantasy suitable for girls, as Pop tries to tell Kitty only for her to find out through her own tragic experiences.

As all of the films discussed suggest, what began to happen both in Mae West vehicles and with the fallen woman films of the latter part of the decade was that other story lines began to exist on an equal plane to the male/female relationship. The roles of women began to take on more dimensions thus diluting the focus on issues of sexuality. Love was still a central theme, but not the only theme. Mae West characters began to understand that acquiring diamonds and controlling men for the sake of power and grins were not the most pressing issues in life. Women of the modified version of the fallen woman story overwhelmingly sent the moral message that no good comes from illicit affairs or fixation on class-rise or material wealth. As stated above, *Kitty Foyle* was produced with PCA certification No. 6639. What this means is that 6,638 films had already been reviewed and approved by the time it came out. Thus, by the end of the Thirties, and 6,639 approved movies later, the self-appointed guardians of morality has successfully created their own form of grassroots organization and left their mark on the golden era of Hollywood’s youth. The Production Code had become an official, functional method by which to control motion pictures for the business to survive and play a significant role in responsibly accepting the role of cultural communications.
medium to tens of thousands of women across the United States and even throughout the world.
CONCLUSION

Speaking to the directors, I appealed to their ingenuity and artistic pride, hinting that it takes vastly more artistry to be interesting while observing decent limits than when being risqué.

--Will Hays¹

In the end, the Depression did hit the movie industry and left the big business of the studios at the mercy (or lack thereof) of special interest groups, mainly religious reformers with the ability to affect the financial fortunes of the studios. Catholic groups, other lobbyists, and outside financial investors ultimately had a great deal of sway in dictating how motion pictures were to present the roles of female actresses who they felt influenced the average and impressionable American girls in the theater seats in dangerous ways. Robert Sklar writes, “What was different about the movies in the 1930s was not that they were beginning to communicate myths and dreams- they had done that from the beginning- but that the moviemakers were aware in a more sophisticated way of their mythmaking powers, responsibilities and opportunities.”² While economic expediency was integral to the production of Hollywood films of the interwar period, the awareness of cultural influence was also an influential factor. This study underscores the interrelationship of these two considerations as they unfold in changing representations of


gender and sexuality in American film, which is particularly evident during this time of unprecedented change in all facets of American life, culture, politics, and economics. One of the most evident conclusions in tracing such relationships is that culture and economics are quite inseparable in how our society has developed over the years.

This project traced the development of the Production Code and the role of the Hays Office in negotiating a working environment between in house and outside forces which sought to influence motion picture production. It traces the way a conservative-minded and highly organized religious organization mobilized sufficient influence and changed the way Hollywood portrayed women among other issues addressed by the Code. Variety magazine reported in June 1933 that “over 80% of the world’s chief picture output was partly, partially or completely flavored with the bedroom essence. And into that flavoring, it is also admitted, has strongly flowed, especially during the past year, the stream of perversion.”3 Industry insiders knew they had a problem with which to deal; the issue was who controlled the inevitable changes to address the problem of what some called “over-sexed” pictures.4 One of the most significant points in the argument of this thesis is that at a time of unprecedented change, growth, and financial stress for the industry, Catholic clergymen and laymen successfully pinned Hollywood with a special moral obligation and responsibility, one that applied to movies more than books, newspapers, plays, magazines, or any other public art form. Whether they wanted to be or not, studios during the Golden age of movies were at the vanguard of presenting models of appropriate womanhood and femininity.

3 “Deadline for Film Dirt,” Variety (13 June 1933): 36.
In order to understand the way these concerns manifested in film production, the project also traced a selection of films, grouped by chapter according to genre and year of production, which illustrates how film not only reflects but also creates gender roles. The first chapter examined fallen woman films and Mae West films produced before 1934 to illustrate some of the problems of gender representation inherent in the message and content of motion pictures aimed at female audiences. The second chapter analyzed two groups of screwball comedies, produced after 1934. The first group was important in respect to the conservative shift they represented in representations of women. Leading female characters became “better” role models, finding out on their own, through light, humorous storylines that life really was better in marriage, and with the protection of men. Without hitting audiences over the head with conservative gender expectations, sexual independence and ambition were shown as comical and unrealistic aspirations, unsuitable for ladies. The second group exemplifies the problems of representation which still existed in the screwball genre. Critics still saw fault in how Hollywood again began to skirt the boundaries of appropriateness, in this regard through their mockery of the institution of marriage. Finally, the third chapter reveals another manifestation of the ways Hollywood began to send more conservative messages to women about gender appropriate behavior by modifying Mae West’s films and fallen woman films, interjecting greater social issues and harsher punishment for sinful behavior in their plots. The collective effect is to reveal that society, even if not unanimously, does indeed impact the cultural expression of film production, and this fact allows for a better understanding of mainstream values present during the Depression era in fiction and in reality.
By the opening years of the forties, Hollywood was still holding on to the types of women’s films; films made with female audiences in mind, which had seen Hollywood through the Depression, controversies and all, but by the time the United States was mobilized for war, Hollywood had made the industry-wide decision to mobilize as well. Female audiences were still important as were the images they experienced, but crime, illicit sexuality, uncontrolled ambition, and unscrupulous grasps at material wealth were all eclipsed by other problems. After 1941, Hollywood produced more and more films that presented social realism in terms of larger issues - World War II enabled Hollywood to focus upon a new cycle of war hero films, for example. Clergymen, Catholic laymen, and the Hays Office had placed issues of gender and gender roles high on the list of issues Hollywood studios needed to address more responsibly, and they did. The Production Code became a method to control the content, but more importantly, the message of motion pictures in order for the business to survive. Now, that crisis had passed and Hollywood had new patriotic duties. Moreover, after World War II, particularly in 1947, the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) put Hollywood on trial for alleged communist sympathies. What women did on the screen and how it could potentially affect female audiences was simply less central to the debate about the responsibility of art to society. The threat of communism superceded all previous concerns outside pressure groups held about the motion picture industry.

Lea Jacobs makes an interesting point about the use of the word censorship. Calling the movies of the latter half of the decade ‘censored’ implies that those of the early Thirties were ‘uncensored’. This is not wholly accurate. What this thesis instead suggests is that the perception of appropriate material changed and the motion picture
industry defensively reacted to that change. In other words, social perceptions about women changed and that in turn changed the movies. Analysis of the dynamics of the American movie industry and gender perceptions through the lens of women’s films allows for a better understanding of the complex nexus of changes that occurred in the United States during the Depression. Understanding these developments reveals that as a popular form of mass media communication, the motion picture of the 1930s, newly endowed with sound, shouldered a significant measure of the civic burden which sought to outline moralistic views of gender and provide uplifting social commentary while providing entertainment and half-escapes from the daily realities of Depression-era life.
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