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The Fallen Woman Film and the Impetus for Censorship

> The important thing is to leave the audience with the definite conclusion that immorality is not justifiable, that society is not wrong in demanding certain standards of its women, and that the guilty woman, through realization of her error, does not tempt other women in the audience to follow her course.
>
> JASON JOY, *industry censor*

IN THIS ADVICE, written to Columbia's Harry Cohn, the MPPDA official Jason Joy anticipated and sought to forestall some of the objections typically raised against Hollywood movies in the thirties.[1] Reformers argued that films exercised a pernicious influence upon women. Hollywood was held to be in violation of what one reformer called "the current moral code," to undermine normative definitions of femininity and to promote crime or promiscuity.

Present-day histories of film censorship typically allude to this controversy by using the example of Mae West. Notorious for wisecracks and sexual innuendo, West is said to have generated negative publicity for Hollywood and contributed to the institution of stricter mechanisms of film censorship in the mid-thirties.[2] But the publicity which surrounded West's films and persona formed only one part of a more general discussion about how films might possibly affect sexual mores and conduct. In my view, the pressure on the industry to regulate representations of sexuality is best understood as a function of a set of assumptions about spectatorship, specifically female spectatorship, current in the thirties. I will argue that these assumptions were brought to the forefront of public debate by a particular genre—the fallen woman film.

The criticism of Hollywood framed in terms of how films might affect women began as early as the teens, and varied according to the manner in which spectatorship itself was conceptualized. At the most literal

level, newspapers and magazines depicted Hollywood as a cause and potential site of female delinquency—luring girls away from their homes and into a tenuous and morally suspect profession. A number of news stories about the "movie-struck girl" circulated in the popular press in the teens. The stories, often written in the form of a warning to the reader, described the fate of young women who left home and went to Hollywood to pursue an acting career. Unable to find work, encountering only indifference from the studios, or worse, a producer of dubious morals, hundreds of girls were supposedly stranded in Los Angeles.[3] *Photoplay* regularly ran features advising fans of the difficulty of obtaining work in Hollywood and on the daunting skills required to be an actress or film extra.[4]

Most of the films of the twenties adopt a cautionary tone similar to the print media in dealing with the stereotype of the movie-struck girl. An early example of the type is Maurice Tourneur's *A Girl's Folly* (1917). An innocent country girl is encouraged to break into the movies by a handsome matinee idol. She leaves home in expectation of finding work at the movie studio, but fails her screen test and is left without any source of income. Only the appearance of her mother saves her from ruin at the hands of the star. The *American Film Institute Catalog* of feature films from the twenties lists several other examples of melodramas in which a girl goes to Hollywood to seek her fortune, only to become vulnerable to the attentions of an unscrupulous actor, producer, or "sheik." Examples include *Mary of the Movies* (Columbia Productions, 1923), *Broken Hearts of Hollywood* (Warner Brothers, 1926), and *Stranded* (Sterling Pictures, 1927). In a more comic vein, the heroine of *Are Parents People?* (1925) attempts to reunite her estranged parents by pretending to be "movie-mad" and to run away with a sheik, star of "The Love Brute." In *Ella Cinders* (1926), the eponymous heroine escapes from the tyranny of her mother and sisters by winning an acting contest and going off to Hollywood. No job is waiting for her at the studio, and she inadvertently causes mayhem on several sets, but eventually she is given a chance and becomes a star. Even when these films exculpate Hollywood as an industry, they indicate that the film producers felt the need to respond to public anxiety about the movie-struck girl. Indeed, the film industry trade association, the MPPDA, was so concerned about this issue that in 1925, in association with the YWCA, it organized a residence for young women seeking work as film actresses.[5]

The rather sensationalized stories about the fate of women in Hollywood were paralleled by a more abstract, and scientifically respectable,

discourse on the psychological effects and social consequences of film viewing. The Payne Fund Studies, published in 1933, provide a good example of this kind of analysis of media effects. Although most of the studies dealt with the effects of film viewing on young children, one monograph focused upon male and female adolescents. This study, Herbert Blumer and Philip M. Hauser's *Movies, Delinquency and Crime,* explicitly linked the gangster film with the problem of violent crime among boys in the urban tenements, and the "sex picture"—stories about gold diggers, flappers, and vamps—with delinquency and various forms of prostitution among young women.[6] The following question, part of a survey administered by Blumer and Hauser to girls in reform school, indicates some of the assumptions they made about the effects of film viewing: "Did the movies suggest to you any of the following ideas of making easy money? By getting a job and working. By shoplifting. By 'gold-digging men.' By gambling. By sexual delinquency with men. By living with a man and letting him support you."[7] The responses charted out for girls in this survey question recapitulate many of the complaints about the movies which were being made by other reform groups in the period. Women's clubs, educators, and even some newspaper editors considered the movies a possible cause of "vice."[8]

While reformers and social scientists did not usually describe films in any detail, their discussions of female spectatorship frequently made reference to a genre which I call the fallen woman film.[9] While the genre is not popular with present-day audiences, it was a staple of Hollywood melodrama. Precisely because it was already recognized as a type, however loosely defined, it functioned as a lightning rod, channeling reformers' more general anxieties about Hollywood's effect on sexual mores. Moreover, because the fallen woman story turned upon an act of seduction or adultery, it thematized many of the reformers' own concerns about sexual deviance among female spectators. An overview of these recognized genre conventions will help to make clear how the films came to be perceived as transgressive.

Literary Antecedents

The story of the fallen woman derives from a set of nineteenth-century narrative and iconographic conventions which were themselves in flux in the twenties and early thirties. Traditional renderings of the story, in which the erring woman was irredeemably punished, had begun to seem

outdated, at least for some sectors of the audience. For example, in a review of the 1929 version of *Madame X*, *Variety* warned its readers that the film might not appeal to urban audiences nor to younger viewers: " 'Madame X' should show other than in the metropolises and the keys before it is determined by the film buyers if there is mass appeal in it. The younger element nowadays doesn't want this kind of sex, for the sex angle here is of the sordid sort, the thorough-bred woman going down the line to become an absinthe wretch."[10] Hollywood both solicited and helped to construct the change in audience tastes to which *Variety* refers. The fallen woman story underwent decided transformations early in the postwar period, transformations which were sometimes foregrounded in films about changing sexual mores. In *Wine of Youth* (1924), for example, a young flapper's rather wild and freewheeling style of courtship is misconstrued by her conservative father as a sign of her "ruin." I will argue that the resistance to the fallen woman film on the part of censors and reformers largely centered upon such new permutations of the genre. That is, I will explain the hostile reception of the films in terms of their deviations from the traditions of nineteenth-century melodrama.

The stereotype of the fallen woman pervaded nineteenth-century popular culture, appearing in fiction, stage melodrama, opera, and narrative painting, in British, American, and European contexts. A prototypical example is a set of three paintings by Augustus Egg exhibited in 1858 without titles and now known as *Past and Present.*[11] The first painting is set in a well-appointed drawing room. The accused woman lies prostrate before her husband; in the background two girls are playing, building a house of cards. The second painting is set in a poor and rather bare apartment. The children of the absent mother, now older and alone, stare out the window at the moon and a wisp of cloud. In the last painting, the repetition of the moon and clouds indicates that the scene is simultaneous with the previous one. The woman is beneath the arches of a bridge, an icon traditionally connected to the moment of the fallen woman's isolation and suicide.[12] She is poorly dressed and alone except for a baby (by convention illegitimate) which is barely visible in the frame. Her fall is enacted in this movement from the bourgeois drawing room to the bridge by the river, implying a loss of both class and familial status.

Another variant of the fall concentrates on a young servant, seamstress, or uneducated village girl who is seduced by an upper-class man. In examples of this type, which include works as diverse as Elizabeth Gaskell's *Ruth* (1853), and Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*

(1891), class difference highlights the woman's defenselessness, her status as victim in a system she does not control.[13] Typically, she does not actively desire the rake who pursues her and is unaware of his designs.

In England, stories about errant mothers separated from their children or innocent servant girls seduced and abandoned were a commonplace of both serialized magazine fiction and the novel between 1835 and 1880.[14] Authors of domestic novels such as Elizabeth Inchbald, Amelia Opie, and Elizabeth Helm[15] dealt with the fallen woman, as did many of the major novelists of the period: Anthony Trollope (*Can You Forgive Her?* 1865; *The Vicar of Bullhampton,* 1870), George Eliot (*Adam Bede,* 1859), Wilkie Collins (*The Fallen Leaves,* 1879; *The New Magdalen,* 1873), and George Moore (*Esther Waters,* 1894). In America, two early domestic novels, Susanna Rowson's *Charlotte Temple* (1794) and Hannah Webster Forster's *The Coquette* (1797) treat the type.[16] The fallen woman also plays a central role in Eugène Sue's *Les Mystères de Paris* (1842–43), and, in a more realistic mode, Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857). The courtesan, a more cynical and knowing version of the type, goes back at least as far as Abbé Prévost's *Manon Lescaut* (1753), but acquired particular notoriety with Zola's *Nana* (1879). The courtesan is redeemed by love in Balzac's *Splendeurs et misères des courtisanes,* in *La Comédie humaine* (1846), and Alexandre Dumas's play *La Dame aux camélias* (1852) from his novel of the same name.

The fallen woman story also provided source material for many well-known opera libretti and stage melodramas. Giuseppi Verdi's *La Traviata* (1853) derives from *La Dame aux camélias,* and Jules Massenet's *Manon* (1885) and Giacomo Puccini's *Manon Lescaut* (1893) from the Prévost novel. There were three stage versions of Mrs. Henry Wood's best-selling novel about an errant mother, *East Lynne* (1861). The play consistently attracted large audiences, becoming one of the standbys to which stock companies reverted when theater revenues were down.[17]

Despite its popularity, the fallen woman story attracted controversy throughout the nineteenth century and was subject to various forms of censorship. Lord Chief Justice Campbell urged enactment of the Obscene Publications Act in England in 1857 after becoming incensed by the English translation of Dumas's *La Dame aux camélias.*[18] In the mid-Victorian period, novels such as Mrs. Gaskell's *Ruth* engendered debate insofar as they represented rape or seduction in a popular medium which found its way into the home.[19] Mudie's circulating library, one of the major distributors of three-volume novels, refused to carry

Eliot's *Adam Bede* and Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles.*[20] Perhaps the most notorious instance of censorship is the attempted prosecution of Gustave Flaubert in 1857 on the grounds that *Madame Bovary* was offensive to public morals.[21] While not the object of official censure, the second half of *Nana* had to be bowdlerized for serial publication in the journal *Le Voltaire.*[22]

The fallen woman genre consistently offended nineteenth-century readers because plot conventions ran afoul of normative definitions of femininity. Although there has recently been some question about the degree to which individuals adhered to the norm of chastity in practice, as an ideal, purity was central to the Victorian conception of womanhood, at least for the middle class.[23] The genre became problematic insofar as the sympathetic portrayal of the heroine seemed to undermine the distinction between chaste and unchaste women.

The controversies around the genre intensified toward the end of the nineteenth century under the impetus of a number of works which explicitly questioned the moral value of purity. These works, considered daring by contemporary readers, prepared the way for the updated variants of the fallen woman plot which became popular in film and fiction after World War I. In George Moore's *Esther Waters* (1894), the heroine denounces characters who condemn her for having an illegitimate child and struggles to raise her son on meager earnings as a domestic. She finally returns to live with the attractive gambler who seduced her rather than marry a minister. George Bernard Shaw's play *Mrs. Warren's Profession* (1894) also inverts traditional moral categories. A madam justifies her chosen profession as a way out of poverty, and argues that prostitution is a rational alternative for working-class women under capitalism. Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* (1900), written under the influence of naturalism, focuses upon the social circumstances and psychological pressures which make chastity difficult for the heroine. After having lost her job, and a berth in her older sister's household, Carrie drifts into a life as a kept woman. She is driven as much by a desire to buy pretty clothes and enjoy the nightlife of the city as by her desperate financial straits.

At the turn of the century, the works by Moore, Shaw, and Dreiser which debunked the ideal of female purity were subjected to lengthy censorship disputes. Both Mudie's and W. H. Smith, a circulating library and bookstore chain, refused to carry *Esther Waters.*[24] *Mrs. Warren's Profession,* though written in 1894, could not be performed until

1902 thanks to a ban by the Lord Chamberlain's Examiner of Plays.[25] The publisher of *Sister Carrie* required heavy emendations of the original manuscript, and even then was reluctant to publish the book.[26]

In the early years of the twentieth century, however, censorship pressures lessened, and popular fiction began to echo the representations of female sexuality found in Moore, Dreiser, and other naturalists. David Graham Phillips' *Susan Lenox: Her Fall and Rise,* completed prior to the author's death in 1911 and published in 1917, is in the vein of *Sister Carrie.* The heroine prostitutes herself in order to escape from the miseries of life in the tenements and the brutalizing effects of factory labor. As Elizabeth Janeway has pointed out in an analysis of the novel, Susan's fall is presented in Nietzschean terms, as an act of strength and self-affirmation.[27] In response to a sermon by a Salvation Army preacher, she asserts that "the wages of sin is sometimes a house on Fifth Avenue."[28] Like *Susan Lenox, Rain,* the 1922 play by John Colton and Clemence Randolph adapted from a short story by W. Somerset Maugham, repudiates the terms of the moral discourse directed at the fallen woman. The play focuses on a missionary worker who attempts to reform the prostitute Sadie Thompson. The missionary's treatment of Sadie is shown to be both hard-hearted—he proposes to deport her from Pago Pago to face jail in the United States—and a denial of his own sexuality. In the last act of the play, his own unconscious desire for Sadie drives him to rape and suicide. Sexuality is thus posed as an instinctual force which defies moral judgment and argument.

Although certainly not in the naturalist tradition of *Susan Lenox* or *Rain,* Anita Loos's comic best-seller *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1926) takes to an extreme their cynicism about the ideal of purity. Written as a diary from the point of view of Lorelei, a kept woman, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* neither condemns nor justifies her sexual status. In a real departure from genre conventions, Lorelei does not even find herself in desperate circumstances; the overriding motivation for her actions is her frank and unabashed pursuit of diamonds.

The Fallen Woman Film

In the postwar period, there is a pronounced disparity between the reformers' treatment of the fallen woman genre in film and its literary counterparts. By the twenties, attempts to censor the fallen woman story

in drama and popular fiction had largely abated. Of the examples cited above, censorship was attempted in only one case, that of *Susan Lenox* in 1917.[29] By the early thirties, one finds only isolated attempts to suppress fallen woman novels, such as Donald Henderson Clarke's *Female*.[30] In contrast, agitation for film censorship in this period often centered upon complaints about the "sex picture." The films became more notorious, and were eventually more closely regulated, than the literary sources from which they drew. The disparity in the treatment of film versus popular fiction derives from the ways in which censors and reformers regarded the audience for these two media. Reformers and MPPDA officials were often at pains to distinguish film from literature, and they argued that the cinema necessitated relatively stronger forms of control. In the Formula, a set of policies adopted in 1924 to govern the acquisition of literary properties by the studios, the MPPDA aimed to prevent "the prevalent type of book and play from becoming the prevalent type of picture."[31] The industry's Production Code, adopted in 1930, explained the logic of this distinction between film and literature:

> Most arts appeal to the mature. This art appeals at once to every class, mature, immature, developed, undeveloped, law abiding, criminal. Music has its grades for different classes; so has literature and drama. This art of the motion picture, combining as it does the two fundamental appeals of looking at a picture and listening to a story, at once reached [*sic*] every class of society. [Thus] it is difficult to produce films intended for only certain classes of people. . . . Films, unlike books and music, can with difficulty be confined to certain selected groups.[32]

The controversy around the fallen woman film clearly illustrates the special standards applied to the cinema as a mass medium. Versions of the story already current within the domain of popular fiction were deemed inappropriate for an audience which included children, teenage girls, and other groups defined as potentially "deviant," such as second-generation immigrants.

Much of the debate around the fallen woman genre attached to updated variants of the plot which criticized or trivialized traditional ideals of female purity. It should be noted, however, that while Hollywood was certainly influenced by contemporary literary treatments of the type, it drew material from the span of the genre's history, including nineteenth-century works from both Europe and America.[33] Adaptations from

nineteenth-century sources included versions of *Anna Karenina* made in 1915, 1927 (as *Love*), and 1935; *La Dame aux camélias*, made in 1915, 1917, 1921, 1927, and 1936; and *East Lynne*, made in 1916, 1921, 1925, and 1931. In some cases even the traditional iconography of the genre was transferred to film. In *Waterloo Bridge* (1931, 1940), as in the Augustus Egg triptych described above, the bridge is the site of the fallen woman's despair and suicide. D. W. Griffith's *Way Down East* (1920), adapted from Lottie Blair Parker's popular play, contains a classic scene in which the heroine is cast out into the snow, forced to leave her domestic haven because of a past transgression. These older forms of the genre were complemented by adaptations from contemporary American literary sources. *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* appeared in 1928. There were two versions of *Rain: Sadie Thompson* in 1928, and a second, under the original title, in 1932. MGM produced a version of *Susan Lenox: Her Fall and Rise* released in 1931, although the film softens the cynicism of the novel.

The influence of contemporary literary treatments of the genre went well beyond the specific works selected for adaptation. In a whole body of films devoted to working-class girls in an urban milieu, the stereotype of the injured innocent or world-weary demimondaine gave way to any one of a series of self-consciously "modern" American types: flappers, gold diggers, chorines, wisecracking shopgirls. While the heroine could be a kept woman, a trickster, or simply out to marry a millionaire, the stories revolved around the problem of obtaining furs, automobiles, diamonds, and clothes from men. Thus, the downward trajectory of the fall was replaced by a rise in class. Examples of this plot, dubbed the "Cinderella story" within the industry,[34] include *Manhandled* (1924), *Orchids and Ermine* (1927), *Possessed* (1931), *Bed of Roses* (1933), and *Baby Face* (1933).

The films dealing with class rise helped attract the attention of censors and reformers to the genre as a whole. While all of the variants of the fallen woman film were eventually subject to censorship by the MPPDA, the versions in which she came to a less than unhappy end made the representation of illicit sexuality especially problematic. The trajectory of the fall set the pattern for most nineteenth-century versions of the story, even given a liberal treatment of the figure of the prostitute. She was sympathetic precisely because, and to the degree that, she experienced remorse, and suffered a pronounced degradation and decline. The Hollywood films which played up the motif of class rise violated the structural underpinnings of this familiar nineteenth-century melodrama.

Like the literary works from which they drew, the films undercut the narrative logic of sin, guilt, and redemption.

There is some question about when the tendency to invert or attenuate the trajectory of the fall was initiated in Hollywood films. The vamp, a figure common in the films of the teens, often got rich at the expense of her male victims. Considered from the point of view of genre conventions, however, the vamp film seems relatively conservative. The vamp's importance lay in the dilemma which she posed for the male hero: *A Fool There Was* (1914) set up an opposition between the Theda Bara character and the hero's virtuous wife. The film turned upon the man's inability to resist the vamp's overtures, and his attendant financial and moral ruin. In contrast, films such as *Susan Lenox* or *Possessed* centered upon the difficulties of women living alone in the city; they emphasized the *heroine's* financial predicament, and her ambition and success, often in amoral terms.

Apart from the vamp film, critics have discussed the emergence of stories about class rise almost entirely with reference to the Depression. For example, according to Richard Griffith, the fallen woman cycle of the thirties addressed the wishes or fantasies of women denied material goods.[35] The aggressive heroine and the motif of class rise predate 1929, however, and in my view are better explained as a function of the transformation of melodrama in the postwar era. The earliest use of the term "gold digger" I have found is the 1919 play *The Gold Diggers*, upon which the 1923 Warner Brothers film of the same name is based. The term appears in a film of 1928, *That Certain Thing*, applied to a poor girl from the tenements who is accused of tricking a rich boy into marriage. In both *Classified* (1925) and *Manhandled* (1924), the heroine accepts clothes and other favors from a wealthy man and is tempted to become a kept woman, although she ends up married to a man of her own class. Following an oft-repeated plot formula, in *It* (1927), the heroine, a sexually aggressive flapper, pursues and finally marries her upper-class boss. The outlines of the Cinderella story are thus well codified by the mid-twenties.

The maternal melodrama, one of the largest subcategories of the fallen woman genre, raises questions of periodization akin to those of the Cinderella films. This plot concerns an errant mother who comes back into contact with her child after many years and conceals her true identity for fear of her evil past. In a lengthy discussion of the type, Christian Viviani makes a distinction between older European forms of the story and more modern, American ones.[36] He claims that the her-

oine's decline is less protracted in the American versions and that a happy ending, in which she is reunited with her child, more common. Viviani explains this relatively upbeat variant of the story as a New Deal parable in which the heroine is "redeemed" by work and, with her illegitimate child, comes to represent the hope of a new society. Certainly there are instances of the maternal melodrama such as La Cava's *Gallant Lady* (1933) which seem to invoke a rhetoric of unity and hope characteristic of the New Deal. But I would argue that what Viviani terms "Americanized" variants of the plot are more frequently typified by a tendency to downplay the heroine's degradation and decline in favor of upward mobility. Further, this motif predates the Depression films.

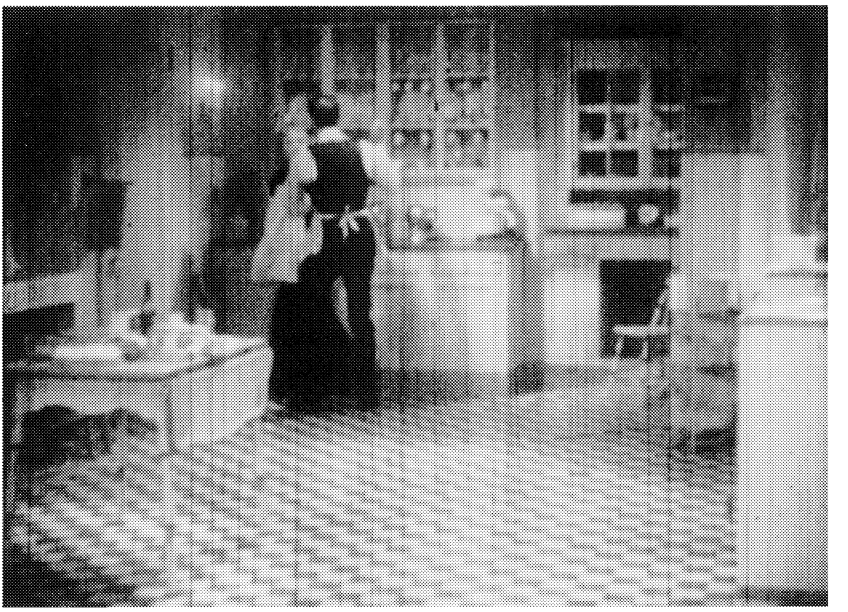
In the case of the maternal melodrama, the heroine's rise can be motivated by any one of a number of plot devices—by work or marriage. As in the Cinderella story, the alteration of the heroine's class status is marked by the acquisition of clothes, automobiles, and new living accommodations. *The Goose Woman* (1925) opens with the mother already fallen. Once a famous diva, she has become a rude and scurrilous drunkard (see Figure 1.1). A clever district attorney requires her testimony at a murder trial. In order to make her presentable in court, he has her bathed, coiffed, and elegantly dressed (see Figure 1.2). Admired and treated with dignity once again, she is able to overcome her past and is reconciled with her son.

The films of the thirties continue to highlight the beauty of the mother's clothes and new surroundings as a means of representing her reintegration into society. In *Gallant Lady*, the heroine becomes an interior decorator and tastefully redesigns the mansion of the man she eventually marries. In *Rockabye* (1932), the heroine, a woman of dubious reputation, has become wealthy as an actress. Although forced to renounce her adopted child and later her lover, she never abandons her upper-class lifestyle. She wears a succession of furs and sequined gowns throughout the film. Her house includes a formal garden and a particularly elegant black and white kitchen (see Figure 1.3). Moreover, in one sequence, she ventures back to a rowdy saloon in a poor part of the city, as various characters point out how far she has risen above her origins "in the gutter." Thus, in terms of both story and mise-en-scène, the mother's redemption is symbolized, and to a degree motivated, by the attainment of upper-class status.

The examples of the Cinderella story and the maternal melodrama give some indication of how the fallen woman plot was updated in the context of Hollywood in the twenties and early thirties. Although the

1.1 *The Goose Woman*

1.2 *The Goose Woman*



1.3 *Rockabye*

films do not entirely abandon nineteenth-century narrative and iconographic conventions, a new emphasis on social mobility, and hence female aggressivity, overlays traditional plots and modes of characterization. Moreover, the heroine appears in increasingly lavish and exotic settings, greatly attenuating the severity of the fall. It is as if Eve were admitted to the Garden of Eden *after* having tasted the apple.

The Impetus for Censorship

In the thirties, the permutations of genre conventions I have described were acknowledged, and criticized, in terms of the films' putative effects upon real women. There was much discussion of the heroine's sexual trespasses and in particular violations of the ideal of female chastity. Consider a column by the film critic of the *Nation* entitled "Virtue in 1933":

> It happens that the climaxes of the two pictures seen this week, one at New York's largest theater and the other at one of its smallest, hinge on the same problem of conduct in a young girl's mind. The problem, of course, is not a particularly new one. Long ago there was a picture

> called "Way Down East" in which Miss Lillian Gish was to be seen grappling with it. . . . The only reason that one calls attention to its recurrence as a major theme at this time is that it may serve to illustrate the profound change that has come over movie producers and audiences alike in their attitude towards this and similar problems. No longer is there a certain risk of sympathy in showing the hero in the arms of his mistress, the heroine having a child by someone other than her husband, the ingenue making a few mistakes before settling down to a closer observance of conventions.[37]

The *Nation*, a liberal magazine, takes a "moderate" view: both the industry and the public participate in a general transformation of sexual mores. But other sources, more critical of the industry, argued that this type of film affirmed and promulgated undesirable changes in sexual mores. For example, in *The Content of Motion Pictures*, one of the Payne Fund Studies, Edgar Dale noted: "Colorful and attractive stars are commonly given roles depicting women who lose their virtue, who are ruined by men, lead profligate lives."[38] Dale found this a "dangerous situation" because the use of stars in such roles made the violation of the "current moral code . . . desirable or attractive."[39] Thus, the films were criticized insofar as Hollywood was presumed to promote sex outside of marriage for women.

While commentary was directed at the representation of sexuality within the cycle, there were also complaints about the representation of money. One finds references to films which show kept women "living in luxury" or what was rather vaguely identified as "glamour." Here, for example, is a letter of complaint sent to Will Hays from Alice Ames Winter, a former chairwoman of the General Federation of Women's Clubs who worked for the MPPDA representing the interests of women:

> Recent pictures from [*So*] *This is Africa*, through *Temple Drake*, *Baby Face*, etc. down to Constance Bennett's latest [*Bed of Roses*], which I saw the day I got back home, and which again is the story of a criminal prostitute's methods of wangling luxury out of rich men . . . the constant flow of these pictures leaves me with mental nausea. . . .[40]

An article in *Photoplay* also bemoaned the trend with an article entitled "Charm? No! No! You Must Have Glamour."[41] The main objection to this aspect of the cycle was that the films encouraged prostitution by the representation of luxury. One newspaper columnist referred to the

"flourishing crop of loose ladies on the screen," suggesting that such films constituted a temptation for women in that the heroine got rich, "practical lessons in sin."[42]

The point was discussed in an academic context in one of the Payne Fund Studies already noted, Blumer and Hauser's *Movies, Delinquency and Crime*. Blumer and Hauser's analysis of delinquency extended beyond representations of violence and criminality to include what researchers described as scenes of luxury, wealth, and ease. In analyzing the film preferences of delinquent youth, Blumer and Hauser called attention to films which they claimed stimulated a desire for money, stylish clothes, goods, and cars. Here is how they explained the potential effect of the movies on adolescent girls:

> We have noted the influence of the motion pictures in instilling desires for clothes, automobiles, wealth, and ease in boys and young men and in suggesting the idea of easily attaining them. Among girls and young women this influence of the movies seems even more pronounced, for a greater premium seems to be placed on fine clothes, appearance, and a life of ease in the case of women. . . . In many cases the desire for luxury expresses itself in a smarter and more fashionable selection of clothes, house furnishings, etc., within the financial means of the girl; but, on the other hand, many of the girls and young women studied grow dissatisfied with their own clothes and manner of living and in their efforts to achieve motion picture standards frequently get into trouble.[43]

Blumer and Hauser argued further that the girl's desire for represented objects could exacerbate the process of identification with sexually delinquent female characters. The researchers also noted, without the faintest trace of irony, that the allure of Hollywood's ideal of consumption was enhanced for those from "areas of high delinquency [where] the absence of wealth is generally greatest, and the opportunities of getting it legitimately are fewest. . . ."[44]

The Payne Fund Studies thus evoked the fallen woman film in the course of an attempt to analyze the possible deleterious consequences of film viewing, especially for working-class and immigrant women. More broadly, in the popular discourse on the films, the genre served as a privileged example of the kind of sexual license that reformers objected to within the Hollywood cinema as a whole.

The Model of Self-Regulation

There is every indication that the MPPDA was aware of the nature and extent of the criticisms being directed at Hollywood. For example, writing of the film *Red Headed Woman* in 1932, an industry censor compared the figure of the gold digger and that of the gangster, and noted that in each case complaints centered upon the problem of glamour:

> There is a striking similarity between the treatment of this character and the earlier treatment of the gangster character. . . . Because he was the central figure, because he achieved power and money and a certain notoriety, our critics claimed that an inevitable attractiveness resulted. And that was what they objected to in gangster pictures. They said we killed him off but that we made him glamorous before we shot him. This is what you are apt to be charged with in this case. While the Red Headed Woman is a common little creature from over the tracks who steals other women's husbands and uses her sex attractiveness to do it, she is the central figure and it will be contended that a certain glamour surrounds her.[45]

Writing in 1933, another industry censor noted:

> [This] is undoubtably an unfortunate time to bring the kept woman on the screen again and we are doing our best to make the studio heads conscious of the fact that the piling up of sex stories at the present time may bring about a situation where it will be necessary to get the studio heads together and make an agreement to lay off this type of story such as occurred when the gangster films got too numerous.[46]

At issue, then, for the MPPDA and for the industry, was how to enact the conventions of the genre given the complaints about rich, attractive, and loose-living heroines.

But how did the presuppositions and concerns of the reform movement inflect the censorship of specific films? In what forms, and by what mechanisms, did public debate and criticism of the industry impinge upon the production process? The most extensive description of the MPPDA's policy and procedure is Raymond Moley's *The Hays Office*, published in 1945.[47] Moley, who wrote a number of books and articles on behalf of the MPPDA in the forties, had access to primary materials which until recently have not been available to researchers. As his arguments

have been widely accepted, they are worth summarizing in some detail. Moley focuses on the Production Code, a statement of industry policy proposed by the MPPDA and adopted by the industry in 1930. Moley's explanation of the function of the Code adopts what may be considered a legal model of self-regulation. Like a law, the Code is thought to provide a series of prohibitions or constraints on production (with a list of topics to be avoided as well as a "Reasons" section justifying regulation as such). According to Moley, these prohibitions could not be "enforced" prior to 1934. By an agreement reached in 1930, the studios were not to release any feature that did not meet with the Studio Relations Committee's approval. When a disagreement would arise between the committee and a producer, however, an appeal would be made to a panel composed of other producers—the so-called Hollywood Jury. Since the Jury usually decided in favor of its fellow producers, the recommendations of the Studio Relations Committee were easy to ignore.

The situation changed following the events of 1933–34. The Payne Fund Studies, widely quoted and discussed in the popular press, gave rise to much negative publicity for the film industry. The Catholic Legion of Decency's widely broadcast threat of a boycott of the cinema in April of 1934 augmented this negative publicity. Moley argues that as a result of this public pressure, the MPPDA made changes in the administrative mechanisms of censorship. Hays was able to negotiate concessions from producers which made it possible to "enforce" the Code. The Studio Relations Committee was reconstituted as the Production Code Administration under Joseph Breen and the Hollywood Jury eliminated. Moley claims that as of 1934 the Production Code Administration had the power to bar a film from exhibition in any theater owned by or affiliated with any member company of the MPPDA. During this period and up until 1948, Paramount, Warners, RKO, MGM, and 20th Century-Fox, all members of the MPPDA, owned 77 percent of the important first-run theaters in the United States.[48] The Code could be enforced, then, because in the final instance a producer could not get access to the major, first-run release outlets without the approval or "seal" of the Production Code Administration.

Moley's argument hinges upon the idea that censorship had a power almost comparable to that of the legal notion of prior restraint. But it seems unlikely that the Code was simply "enforced" in the manner of a law, through the exercise of such power. This argument runs counter to evidence which has become available to us since the publication of

Moley's book in 1945: the MPPDA case files; the memoirs of a Hollywood censor, *See No Evil;* and an unpublished oral history conducted with Geoffrey Shurlock, a member of the Production Code Administration.[49] Further, considered as a model, it seems to me that the quasi-legal conception of censorship does not do justice to the peculiarities, the *specificity* of the system of self-regulation.

There is no evidence that industry censors were ever in a position routinely to block the exhibition of a film produced by one of the major studios. In direct opposition to Moley's argument, Geoffrey Shurlock, who worked under Breen in the Production Code Administration, claims that censors could not refuse to pass a film (withhold a "seal"):

> No, we never refused seals. We were in the business of granting seals. The whole purpose of our existence was to arrange pictures so that we could give seals. You had to give a seal.[50]

Shurlock's remarks make sense if one considers the economics of industry self-regulation. The MPPDA, charged with protecting the long-run interests of the industry, would hardly consider it desirable to damage profits by disturbing the regular issue of films.[51] Thus, it is not likely that withholding completed films from exhibition was adopted as a matter of standard MPPDA procedure.

I am interested not in exposing the "errors" in Moley's history but in demonstrating the difficulties inherent in explaining MPPDA policy and procedures along quasi-legal lines. The powers of and limits on self-regulation differ markedly from those of state or civil censorship bodies. It is important to distinguish between the two if we are to account for the specificity of self-regulation as a process. State censors, who were independent of the film industry, were in a position to prevent exhibition. Short of banning a film, they could alter its editing at will by excising segments from a final print. In contrast, the censors for the MPPDA exercised more power while films were in the planning stages than in the review of completed features. This description of the Production Code Administration's operating procedure by Jack Vizzard, who worked under Breen, gives a sense of the importance of preproduction:

> "Huddle" was the heart of the Code operation. . . . It started at ten o'clock sharp, like assembly call. It was nothing more or less than a story conference, in which the staff members reported on the scripts

> they had read on the previous day. It was during the huddle that decisions were made and lines of strategy were drawn up as to how this problem would be met, or that riddle dealt with. After the huddle, the staff members scattered and went their separate ways, some to studios for knock-down-drag-out fights with producers, some to write letters on scripts they had covered, and some to plunge into yet another script. Keeping up with the endless flow of scripts that poured through the office was like trying to run up a hill of sand. While the main body of the work was done on the scripts before the productions reached the sound stages, the right was always reserved to see the picture also. . . .[52]

Vizzard's description of the daily meeting of the Production Code Administration as a "story conference" points to one of the basic differences between self-regulation and state censorship. Self-regulation was an integrated part of film production under the studio system. Industry censors were in a position to request revisions in scripts and, in consultation with writers, directors, and producers, to effect changes in narratives. I take this to be Shurlock's meaning when he says, "The whole purpose of our existence was to *arrange pictures* so that we could give seals" (italics mine). This is very different from a power of restraint—blocking exhibition or "cutting things out" of films. Censors participated in the decision-making process by which the studio hierarchy orchestrated and controlled production. They achieved their ends, within this hierarchy, by means of more or less successful negotiations, what Vizzard refers to as "knock-down-drag-out fights with producers."

It remains unclear, however, how the various social forces confronting the industry influenced the process of negotiation concerning specific films. If we abandon the idea that the Production Code Administration simply "enforced" the Code through the power to restrain exhibition, then it becomes necessary to propose an alternate explanation of how the social relations between the MPPDA and external groups determined censorship, especially during the tense years of 1933 and 1934. It is possible to take account of this social context if we assume that censorship sought to restructure specific films which posed some threat to the industry's political and economic interests. The process of self-regulation may then be described in terms of two distinct but related stages. The first stage—evaluation—consisted in the isolation of films or elements within films likely to offend reform groups or provoke action by government regulatory agencies. The case files indicate that the MPPDA em-

ployed a number of procedures for anticipating how external agencies might react to films. Its employees gathered information on the reception of films both domestically and abroad, and rendered expert opinions about what was likely to be found offensive. It regularly collected data on material cut by state and foreign censorship boards and reviewed letters of complaint from reform groups.

The second stage of censorship consisted in negotiations between the MPPDA and film producers. The MPPDA's object in these negotiations was to find some way of forestalling the anticipated complaints and minimizing the cuts that would be required by the state censorship boards. As a rule, however, producers did not want their films altered. They sought to retain potentially offensive genre elements which presumably had already "proven" their appeal at the box office. Thus this stage of censorship may be characterized as an attempt to compromise between the aims of the MPPDA (to eliminate potentially offensive material) and the aims of producers (to preserve this supposedly profitable material).

This account of the process of regulation does not posit a direct relationship between the demands of external agencies and the form assumed by censorship in any given case. In particular, I dispute the claim, advanced in some film histories, that after 1934 censorship reflected the values and beliefs espoused by the Catholic Legion of Decency.[53] To be sure, the MPPDA was particularly moved to respond to the Legion in this period, but, in terms of the model proposed here, regulation did not entail the simple assimilation of the demands of this or any other pressure group. In any given case the MPPDA employed devices for anticipating or projecting what would offend external agencies. Theoretically it could be, and in fact it sometimes was, wrong in this anticipation. Even after 1934 the MPPDA released films which offended the Catholic Legion of Decency and were given a "Condemned" rating.[54] Further, even if the MPPDA correctly anticipated the demands of external agencies, censorship proper consisted in a series of compromises between it and producers. The utopian ideal of self-regulation was to forestall criticism while at the same time allowing the producer maximal use of his original material. In practice there was continual tension, a kind of push-pull, between conflicting aims or tendencies. Thus censorship as an institutional process did not simply reflect social pressures; it articulated a strategic response to them. And this strategy was worked out on a case-by-case basis, before films went into production.

The usefulness of strategy as a concept for analyzing censorship is that it explains the logic of determination in terms of a dynamic interplay of aims and interests, rather than a cause—the Catholic Legion of Decency—which unilaterally produces an effect—the enforcement of the Code. The model allows for, indeed leads us to expect, a certain variation from film to film, since there would be some latitude in defining problems and arriving at compromises. Yet this model can also account for broader changes in the administration of censorship following the publication of the Payne Fund Studies and the Catholic Legion of Decency campaign.

Consider a problem which censors identified relatively frequently: "adultery is made attractive." As a matter of routine, sometimes with reference to previous cases in which adultery had been a question, censors and producers would work out a compromise which permitted some representation of this act. Certain compromises would thus become institutionalized, repeated, with slight variation, from film to film. These routines were altered following the events of 1934. In the face of escalating public criticism of the industry, censors were in a position to negotiate relatively more extensive revisions of films and scripts. Breen was particularly careful to refine the definition of what was acceptable under the Code. So producers needed to devise and employ a new set of representational strategies in order to justify or defend what censors deemed potentially offensive. There was a more far-reaching transformation, a different narrative elaboration, of offensive material.

This study thus posits censorship as a constructive force, in the sense that it helped to shape film form and narrative.[55] Making comparisons between the MPPDA's treatment of films before and after 1934, it seeks to ascertain differences in the representation of illicit sexuality, money, and class rise in these two periods. It is my contention that the rules censors developed for the treatment of the fallen woman film were primarily concerned with the *structures* of narrative—the nature of endings, motivation of action, patterns of narration. I seek to describe the development of these narrative strategies of censorship and to delineate their implications for Hollywood's representations of female sexuality and its construction of sexual difference.

Before 1934, negotiations between producers and industry censors involved discrete and localized elements of the text. Shots or lines of dialogue which censors deemed offensive might be eliminated or trans-

formed. Frequently, a scene would be added in which the fallen woman's actions were denounced, or emphasis would be placed on her (the film's) unhappy end. After 1934, censors were able to negotiate relatively more systematic alterations of narrative. When evaluating scripts, censors routinely suggested alterations in plot—in the way in which the films motivated the fall and in the consequences which could follow from sexual transgression. A number of narrative strategies could delay or redirect the trajectory of class rise. Often the films stressed the heroine's abasement or punishment rather than her acquisition of wealth. In some cases, the films used some form of narration such as voice-over, opening titles, or a character telling a story in flashback, all of which more or less ambiguously proposed criticisms of the fallen woman's sexual transgressions and her aspirations to wealth.

Self-regulation was not, however, a smooth or completely successful operation. The public response to the fallen woman film, as well as the many disputes between the MPPDA and film producers, suggest that in many cases the MPPDA did not succeed in its efforts to alleviate causes for complaint. One must then explain not only how censorship affected narrative, but also the gaps or inconsistencies in its routines.

This question touches on an area of debate concerning what has been called the subversive or progressive text. Seeking to theorize the relationship between the classical Hollywood text and ideology, a number of critics, most prominently the collective associated with the *Cahiers du Cinéma* in the seventies, have proposed that certain films depart from the transparency and narrative closure typical of the classical text, thereby revealing the ideological presuppositions which underlie it.[56] Feminist critics such as Claire Johnston have been interested in the idea of such "readings against the grain" and have sought to identify mainstream Hollywood films which critique the dominant cinema from within the terms of its mode of address.[57] It is tempting to argue that at least certain examples of the fallen woman cycle constitute subversive texts in Johnston's sense of the term. This is to suggest not that the films directly set out to challenge the values of marriage, hard work, and female chastity, but rather that in their terms of address and enactment of narrative conventions the films inadvertently destabilize the moral and sexual categories which censorship sought to reinforce.

The very notion of a subversive text must be approached with caution, however. This mode of analysis has been criticized as anachronistic and historically untenable. For example, Richard Maltby argues that the

process of finding subversive meanings is unbounded, "restrained only by the subjectivity of the critic," and thus necessarily ahistorical.[58] The problem is the status of textual analysis as evidence, that is, finding viable ways to delimit and contextualize the process of interpretation.

Because industry self-regulation functioned as a sort of machine for registering and internalizing social conflict, it provides an extraordinarily fruitful means of contextualizing film analysis. In the case studies presented here, I have sought to examine films through the grid of the MPPDA's concerns. Archival materials such as production and story files and the case files of the MPPDA have served as a basis for identifying what was considered offensive, morally repugnant, or politically dangerous.

I have chosen six representative cases for analysis out of an initial sample of one hundred titles. The sample includes films made between 1929, when the MPPDA first began to monitor scripts on the West Coast on a regular basis, and 1942, when the system of self-regulation becomes complicated by the Office of War Information's attempt to monitor scripts through its Bureau of Motion Pictures.[59] (See Appendix: Censorship Cases Reviewed for further discussion of the composition of the sample.) There were two criteria for selecting a film for close analysis. First, that film had to have occasioned a statement of MPPDA policy. In some cases, the files contain correspondence between industry censors and Will Hays concerning how a particular type of problem was to be handled. Such instances are instructive because they permit some generalizations about MPPDA routine. A second criterion for selecting a case was that it had to indicate some of the social constraints which had an impact on the formulation of policy. The data compiled by the MPPDA show that some films were heavily censored by external agencies. In several cases, films were banned outright by the New York state board and had to be reedited before their release. Other files contain letters of complaint or clippings of newspaper articles which report low or "condemned" ratings by the Catholic Legion of Decency. Thus, I have been able to single out films which we know in fact went beyond the bounds of the acceptable. These lapses or failures of self-regulation are important for they illuminate the social forces which motivated censorship. In a very real sense, such limit cases defined what was not permissible within the range of films which composed the cycle.

I have used the MPPDA case files not only as a basis for the selection of films, but also as a guide in the process of analysis. The files contain letters and memos in which censors discuss their objections to a script

and provide suggestions for revisions. These documents call attention to specific moments of difficulty or stress. Further, by correlating the MPPDA correspondence, the successive drafts of the screenplay, and the completed film, I have charted how material deemed unacceptable came to be represented. Thus as a methodological principle, all of the extant written materials—drafts of screenplays, memos in which censors rewrote scenes or proposed readings of scripts—are placed at the same level of importance as the film itself. The object of study is, in effect, expanded to include not only the film as such but the entire process of revision. The analysis is concerned with the strategic logic which underlies this process: for example, it seeks to determine if the completed film emphasizes moral questions in a different way than the first draft of the screenplay, or if the events of the plot have been reordered to eliminate a potentially offensive scene from the completed feature.

This approach provides a sense of the *mechanisms* by which social conflicts impinged on a given text—that is, through the protracted negotiations and disputes between the MPPDA and the studios. Further, through sources such as the MPPDA case files it becomes possible to document, with some precision, the *way these conflicts surfaced in representation*—that is, as choices among various versions of the script. Analyzing the differences between these versions permits us to reconstruct the complex network of explicit rules and implicit narrative constraints which determined what was deemed aberrant or acceptable. Further, textual analysis, particularly a discussion of film style, suggests some of the ways these constraints could be circumvented or displaced. Finally, by comparing films across the decade, one can begin to get a sense of how the constraints imposed on representation changed over time. Thus, it becomes possible to delineate what was deviant or unusual within the films of the early thirties in relation to a clearly specified norm—the later versions of the cycle which were approved by the MPPDA.