

WHERE IS YOUR
DAUGHTER TONIGHT?

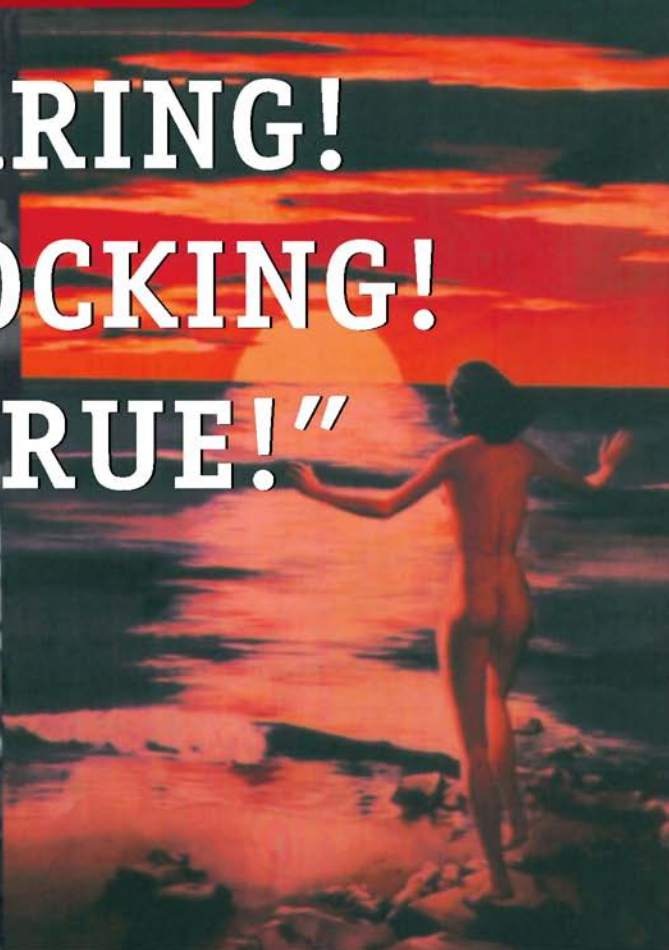
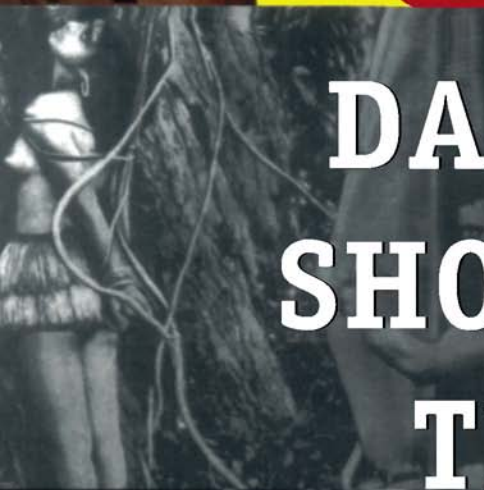


*DON'T BE A
DELINQUENT
PARENT...*



"BOLD!"

**DARING!
SHOCKING!
TRUE!"**



A History of Exploitation Films, 1919–1959

RIHUANA

Eric Schaefer

*Everybody's
talking about*

Monika

“Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!”

COLUMBIA

MARIHUANA

DARING DOPE EXPOSE

3RD WEEK ADULTS ONLY



"BOLD! DARING! SHOCKING! TRUE!"

A History of Exploitation Films, 1919–1959

Eric Schaefer

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for Eithne

Contents

Acknowledgments ix

Introduction: “As Long as It Was in Bad Taste!” 1

1 “An Attempt to ‘Commercialize Vice’”: *Origins of the Exploitation Film* 17

2 “A Hodge-Podge of Cuttings and Splicings”: *The Mode of Production and the Style of Classical Exploitation Films* 42

3 “You Gotta Tell ’Em to Sell ’Em”: *Distribution, Advertising, and Exhibition of Exploitation Films* 96

4 “Thoroughly Vile and Disgusting”: *The Exploitation Film and Censorship* 136

5 “No False Modesty, No Old-Fashioned Taboos”: *The Sex Hygiene Film* 165

6 “The Monster That Caters to Thrill-Hungry Youth”: *The Drug Film* 217

7 “Timely as Today’s Front Page”: *Vice, Exotic, and Atrocity Films* 253

8 “They Wear No Clothes!”: *Nudist and Burlesque Films* 290

9 Conclusion: *The End of Classical Exploitation* 325

Appendix 1—Major Exploitation Producers/Distributors and Their Company Names 343

viii Contents

Appendix 2—Filmography 345

Appendix 3—Video Sources 389

Notes 391

Bibliography 445

Index 459

Acknowledgments

Since I started this project on exploitation films over ten years ago, the question most often posed to me has been, “How did you ever get interested in this stuff?” A second question, always implicit but never verbalized out of friendship or social courtesy, seems to be, “Are you crazy?” I usually respond with what has become a rote answer about how I stumbled across references to some films while looking for a topic on which to write my master’s thesis. Then I justify the study of these tawdry little movies by speaking of the way they reveal a great deal about the culture that produced them and so on and so forth. But recently, I have remembered two events from my childhood that may help answer that oft-posed question.

Both events occurred around 1970, when I was ten or eleven years old. In one instance, I remember baking cookies with my mother and listening to an afternoon call-in show on KMOX radio in St. Louis. At some point during the show, the subject of VD came up. I asked Mom what “the neareal disease” was. She gave me an honest but terse answer, indicating that it was not a good topic of conversation for cookie baking. I was left to wonder about the precise mechanics of how one got such a dreadful sounding illness. The other event took place in Mrs. Clark’s science class at Goodall Elementary School. As children of the psychedelic era, we were fed a steady diet of antidrug movies. Mrs. Clark had ordered—yet again—*Drug Addiction*, an ancient black-and-white film that featured a fairly graphic scene in which a kid, high on marijuana, drinks from a broken soda bottle, slicing his lips and creating a gory mess. Of all the pedantic

x Acknowledgments

drug movies we saw, it was the most visceral and the most fun. But on realizing that it was the same bloody dope movie that she had already screened several times, a horrified Mrs. Clark turned off the projector and vowed never to order it again. The unfinished reel sat on the machine as we proceeded to the day's lesson.

So perhaps my research on exploitation films fills some psychological need. After all, the most significant exploitation topics from the 1920s through the postwar period were venereal disease and drug use. Perhaps I was subconsciously drawn to these films in an effort to resolve or complete those unfinished moments from my quiet, middle-class childhood in the suburbs. Perhaps by closing that circle I might come to a greater understanding of myself and my historically situated position as a speaking subject. Or then again, maybe I am just crazy. . . . At any rate, the following people have either helped me in the analysis of my childhood years, or they are implicated in my insanity. I'm grateful for the references, suggestions, and support that they provided, whether they know it or not: Charles Ramirez Berg, Matthew Bernstein, William Boddy, David Bordwell, Mel Brandt, Darryl Brown and Jeanne Urciolo, Kathryn Burger, Diane Carson, Donald Crafton, Robert E. Davis, Thomas Davison, Mary Desjardins, Bob Eberwein, Craig Fischer, Tom Gunning, Susan Hacker-Stang, Brent Hanley, Mary Beth Haralovich, Doug Hart, Jenny Hoover and Mark Tobin, Mark Jancovich, Maude Jefferis, Henry Jenkins and Cynthia Jenkins, Joli Jensen, Doug Kellner, Chuck Kleinhans, Mark Langer, Bertil Lundgrin, Mike Mashon and Kristi Mashon, Linda Mizejewski, Sam Moffitt, Sandra Moore, Bob Morehead, Krista Olsen, Walter Pinkston, Dana Polan, Jim Ridenour, Dan Streible and Teri Tynes, Tim Swenson, Rachel Thibault, Kristin Thompson, Jim Wehmeyer and Barbara Wehmeyer, Tinky Weisblat, Terrance Jennings Wharton, Jim Wood, Leonid Yurgelas, and my colleagues and students at Emerson College.

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Mike Vraney and Lisa Petrucci of Something Weird Video have been unfailingly generous with their time and resources, going above and beyond the call. They have allowed me to root through the records and other material in the large swv Collection, which has greatly enhanced the texture of this book. Many of the pictures used as illustrations come from that material and are being published for the first time. I am also grateful for the efforts that Mike has made to find and preserve this unique slice of American culture and for the support and friendship that he and Lisa have provided. I was lucky enough to meet Mike through David F. Friedman, the “mighty monarch of the exploitation film world.” When I wrote my first, cautious letter to Dave a dozen years ago, I had no idea that such a long, warm, and productive relationship would develop. He and his wife, Carol, have been tremendously gracious, and the information and inspiration I have received from him cannot be measured. He has helped me “stay with it and for it.”

Note that uncredited illustrations are from my own collection.

My parents, Frederick and Jeanette Schaefer, and my mother-in-law, Helene Johnson, have provided much support, moral and otherwise, over the years. But finally, one person is most responsible for seeing this project

xii Acknowledgments

through to fruition. Eithne Johnson is my partner, my friend, my teacher, and my love. She has enriched my life beyond measure, and her love, encouragement, and intelligence have helped shape this project in more ways than she will ever know. Eithne gave me a reason to write. Indeed, she gave me a reason to live. This book is dedicated to her.

Introduction

“As Long as It Was in Bad Taste!”

So sinister, so suggestive, so subversive is this type of motion picture that organized producers of Hollywood have long since outlawed its manufacture entirely. Only the independent shoe-string producer goes in for the sex pictures in this day of the enlightened film-goer.

—Harry Martin, quoted in *Motion Picture Herald*, 1937

Poor Mr. Martin was very upset when he wrote those words in 1937.¹ He had taken his wife and daughter to see a comedy and found *Smashing the Vice Trust*, “a slice of cinematic slime,” on the same bill. “Imagine our indignation,” he asked readers of the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, “at having foul glimpses into bawdy houses, pictures of unclad females executing the most vulgar dances, and other similar and better-unmentioned subject matter slapped into the teeth of our six-year-old youngster.” Martin had just seen an exploitation film, one that he evidently watched with great care to work up sufficient indignation for his epistle to the newspaper.

Things had changed substantially almost forty years later. When the founder of the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws (NORML) discovered a print of the public domain picture first known as *The Burning Question* languishing in the Library of Congress in the early 1970s, he ordered copies for the group’s fund-raising events. *The Burning Question* was released under one of its alternative titles, *Reefer Madness*,

2 Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!

and given a new lease on life.² During the 1970s it became a major hit on a revived midnight-movie circuit in big cities and college towns. *Reefer Madness* proved popular with “potheads” and their straight counterparts alike due to its outlandish depictions of the effects of marijuana on its users. The film’s original antidope message was drowned out by the laughter of audiences who grooved on the overripe performances, the trite dialogue, and the strained sermons. Camp was cool, and *Reefer Madness* had become the essence of camp.

From roughly 1919 to 1959, exploitation films such as *Smashing the Vice Trust* and *Reefer Madness* existed in the shadow of Hollywood.³ While Hollywood was constructing its image as the world’s premiere manufacturer of wholesome entertainment, a group of independent “exploiteers,” sometimes dubbed “The Forty Thieves,” made and distributed films dealing with topics that censorship bodies and the organized industry’s self-regulatory mechanisms prohibited. Exploitation movies purveyed the forbidden spectacle to moviegoers that the organized industry did not. Naked and unashamed nudists, high-flying hop heads, brazen strippers, vicious vice lords, and high school girls who found themselves “in trouble” populated exploitation movies. The organized industry found the lurid movies an embarrassment, and by the 1920s they had been segregated from the mainstream, becoming targeted for elimination by leaders of the film industry and moral watchdogs. But the ragged little films and the people who made them were tenacious. They survived and, in some cases, thrived.

It is probably already clear that I’m not writing about the films that have most often come to be identified with the term exploitation movie: those cheap genre pictures directed at the teen market by outfits like American International Pictures in the 1950s and 1960s. By the time Sam Arkoff and Jim Nicholson appeared on the scene with their “teenpics,” exploitation films had been around for decades. In the past, critics and historians often lumped exploitation films with Hollywood’s B movies and low-budget genre pictures made by Poverty Row outfits. Yet exploitation films were quite different from the movies cranked out by the major’s B units or the companies that crowded Gower Gulch. The consequence of conflating exploitation films with other low-budget forms has been a failure to distinguish their singular attributes and unique history. When the films are considered at all today—still a fairly rare occasion—they are usually seen and enjoyed by fans of “bad movies.” As such, they are prized for their cinematic ineptitude and become the object of an often sophisticated

reading strategy that stands in opposition to middlebrow and elite taste.⁴ The movies' parochial take on sexuality and drug use, combined with their bombastic promises about shocking truths and fearless frankness, can seem like a tonic when compared with the jaded marketing and merchandising efforts that pass as films today. But as I will reveal, these early exploitation pictures were more than simply "bad" movies.

So what exactly are the exploitation films I am writing about, and how do they differ from the more contemporary understanding of that term? Exploitation producer and former roadshowman David F. Friedman provides the point of departure for the definition of exploitation film as it emerged in the early 1920s and existed throughout the 1950s:

Exploitation pictures are as old as film itself, although they really began to flourish during the height of the original Motion Picture Code. The roadshowmen, the exploiters, weren't subscribers to the Hays Office Code; they were itinerant carnival people. The essence of exploitation was any subject that was forbidden: miscegenation, abortion, unwed motherhood, venereal disease. . . . All those subjects were fair game for the exploiter—as long as it was in bad taste! The technical definition of exploitation movies is cheaply made pictures distributed by roadshowmen or by local independents called states'-righters. A major studio was opening, in those days [the 1930s and 1940s], 400 prints. An exploitation picture never had more than 15 or 20, and they moved around from territory to territory. . . . They often leased the theater (now called four-wallings), and once they paid the exhibitor and put their own cashier in the booth, they could do anything they wanted.⁵

Friedman's definition indicates that long before "exploitation film" had been broadened to include movies engineered to appeal to kids tooling down to the drive-in with their newly acquired disposable income in hand, the term had denoted an even more disreputable type of movie. Indeed, the broader use of the term illustrates the degree to which this historically specific designation has been diluted over time to embrace a greater range of practices.

Exploitation became a recognized and distinct category of motion picture during the 1920s. Films that dealt with the forbidden topics segregated from the mainstream industry were sometimes called "blues" or "Main Street movies," a reference to low-end "Main Street" theaters or grindhouses that regularly booked them.⁶ Although the term exploitation picture was probably bandied about in conversation earlier, it was being used in print to refer to a specific category of motion picture at least as

4 Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!

early as 1933. A tradebook ad for the 1933–1934 season found low-budget producer Bud Pollard promising release of six “exploitation features” with titles like *Lunatic at Large* and *Dance Hall Dames*.⁷ Of *She Devil Island*, which included scenes of torrid dancing and women warriors bathing in the surf, *Film Daily*’s 1936 review claimed “houses that go for exploitation specials will find something up their alley in this attraction.”⁸ A 1938 review of *Wajan* in *Motion Picture Daily* stated, “Theaters which play ‘exploitation’ films, as they are called, may find this Bali picture good box office. There are enough ‘angles’ here to offer ballyhoo-minded exhibitors plenty of material. . . . The film is distinguished by the semi-nudity of the Balinese ‘beauties.’”⁹ At the same time, *Boxoffice* was also classifying adult movies such as *It’s All in Your Mind*, a film about a sex-starved milque-toast, and *The Unashamed*, a nudist film, as exploitation features.¹⁰ And an ad for Modern Film Corporation in the 1938 *Film Daily Yearbook* highlighted the company’s status as “exclusive foreign distributors of six exploitation features” including *Jaws of the Jungle* and *Guilty Parents*.¹¹ Among industry insiders it was understood that exploitation movies were not family fare, that most were exhibited as “adults-only” programs, and that they were often booked into theaters that specialized in “slightly lurid and indecorous roadshow attractions.”¹²

The term exploitation film is derived from the practice of exploitation, advertising or promotional techniques that went over and above typical posters, trailers, and newspaper ads.¹³ Exploitation producers conceded that because their films lacked identifiable stars or the recognition provided by conventional genres, they needed an extra edge to be “put over” with audiences. A kind of carnivalesque ballyhoo became integral to their success. During the postwar years, the designation of exploitation film was gradually expanded to include almost any low-budget movie with a topical bent.¹⁴ During the 1960s and 1970s, the term was modified to indicate the subject that was being exploited, such as for “sexploitation” and “blaxploitation” movies. But it was only from the 1950s that the term became more fluid.¹⁵ For the purposes of this book, I have returned to the use of exploitation film as it was understood in the 1930s and subsequently codified by Friedman above. For further clarification, I am modifying the term to “classical exploitation film.” This not only indicates a return to the specificity of its original meaning when applied to a particular class of films but also emphasizes the form’s parallel development with the classical Hollywood cinema.

Classical exploitation films generally conformed to the following fea-

tures. First, their primary subject was a “forbidden” topic. The major exploitation topics included sex and sex hygiene, prostitution and vice, drug use, nudity, and any other subject considered at the time to be in bad taste. The forbiddenness of a subject could best be gauged by the mainstream industry’s prohibition of certain topics through self-regulatory mechanisms such as the “Don’ts and Be Carefuls” and the Production Code, as well as censorship on state and local levels. These subjects were dealt with directly and were the primary point of interest in the motion picture. This would then exclude all movies, whether made by majors, minors, or independents, that had drug addicts as peripheral characters or that dealt with subjects like prostitution in an oblique fashion. Also excluded would be motion pictures about forbidden themes shown only in restricted situations, such as those used for the training of medical or military personnel, law enforcement officers, and so on. However, restricted films that were picked up by exploiters for release to the general public in theaters would fall under the exploitation rubric.

Second, classical exploitation films were made cheaply, with extremely low production values, by small independent firms. Few if any well-known artists are associated with exploitation films either in front of or behind the camera. Exploitation films used shoddy standing sets, relied extensively on stock footage, were filled with continuity errors, employed only the simplest camerawork and the most basic editing, and, in the case of sound films, poor recording and matching. A tiny budget alone, however, was not enough for a film to qualify as a classical exploitation movie. Many well-known no-budget films like *Detour* (1945), *Robot Monster* (1953), *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (1959), not to mention scores of ultracheap westerns and “race” films, fell into other recognized genres or categories and lacked the controversial themes that would be necessary to rate as exploitation films. As a result of their restricted budgets, classical exploitation pictures eschewed the “style” of the classical Hollywood cinema (continuity editing, spatial and temporal coherence, etc.) and the rhetorical or categorical logic of most documentaries. This is because, to one degree or another, classical exploitation films centered on some form of forbidden spectacle that served as their organizing sensibility—at the expense of others.

Third, exploitation films were distributed independently. Distribution tended to be on a roadshow or a states’ rights basis, and many distributors engaged in “four-walling.” On very rare occasions, a film might be made by a major company and unloaded to states’ rights distributors. Films of

6 Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!

foreign origin, both high- and low-budget, with the requisite titillating material were picked up for release on the American exploitation circuit.

Fourth, the films were generally exhibited in theaters not affiliated with the majors. A small circuit of grindhouses or Main Street theaters specializing in exploitation product did exist, usually bordering the skid row neighborhoods of major cities, and at times exploitation films crossed over to burlesque theaters. But they usually played in theaters that showed standard Hollywood fare that took a break from their typical programming. Because of the films' low budgets, lack of familiar stars, and immediately recognizable generic appeal, the exploiteers had to pitch their films by sensationalizing them. Going to an exploitation film was often a carnival-like event because of the extrafilmic practices that accompanied the show. Lecturers, slide presentations, the sale of pamphlets or books on the picture's topic, and the presence of uniformed "nurses" to attend to those who might faint due to the "shocking" sights became a major part of the exploitation film experience. At times, shows were segregated by gender and almost without exception were restricted to audiences made up of adults only.

Finally, in comparison to the mainstream motion picture industry, relatively few prints of an exploitation film were in release at any given time. However, unlike most other movies, exploitation films could be in release for ten to twenty years or more. Thus a movie's status as an exploitation film was determined by multiple factors. The great majority of exploitation films display all of the characteristics outlined above, though it should be noted that some movies that qualify as exploitation releases may have lacked one or two of these attributes. Under the broad heading of exploitation films fall a number of subcategories defined by the forbidden topic they exploited; sex hygiene, drug, nudist, vice, and burlesque films were among the most frequently produced.

Before discussing the time frame of this book, it may be necessary to explain what exploitation films were not: hard-core pornography.¹⁶ Although exploitation movies and pornographic films would eventually converge in the late 1960s, they followed separate lines of development up to that point. Friedman has said that "after Mr. Edison made those tin-types gallop, it wasn't but two days later that some enterprising guy had his girlfriend take her clothes off [for the camera]."¹⁷ This colorful description is probably quite accurate. Joseph W. Slade argues that by 1899 the first totally nude females appeared in motion pictures and that within three or four years acts of sexual intercourse had been captured on film.¹⁸ The



1 Siamese twins Daisy and Violet Hilton, who would later star in the exploitation film *Chained for Life* (1950), appear at a showing of *Marihuana* in the 1930s. (Something Weird Video Collection)

precise date of the first pornographic film remains undetermined, though two short movies have been identified as early as 1907 and 1908.¹⁹ Europe was the center of early pornography production. The first extant American film, *A Free Ride* (also known as *A Grass Sandwich*) has been dated about 1915, although it is believed that sexually explicit movies were made in the United States prior to that date.

Exploitation films and the pornographic “stag” films were different in several important respects. Stag films were always short, usually only one or two reels in length. Exploitation movies were issued as short subjects

8 Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!

and in feature-length form. Stags depicted actual, nonsimulated sexual acts—something never found in exploitation films. Stags were produced for private viewings in “officially decried but socially tolerated circumstances (the brothel, the ‘smoker’).”²⁰ Exploitation movies were always shown in theaters or other public places. Stag films were strictly illegal, whereas exploitation films faced legal problems only in some areas at some times. Finally, stag movies, as the name indicates, were produced to cater to the desires and values of heterosexual men, whereas exploitation movies were capable of attracting both men and women and did not limit their appeal to a strictly heterosexual audience. So we are left with two distinct images: the illegal, sexually explicit, short stag film playing privately to male audiences in smoky fraternity houses or the basement of the American Legion hall, and the exploitation film, salacious and suggestive but not overtly pornographic, playing to a heterogeneous audience in a public site.

The exploitation film roughly paralleled the rise and fall of the classical Hollywood cinema. Prior to 1920, a number of mainstream companies, including Universal, American, and Triangle, made films that dealt directly with drug use, abortion, prostitution, and other topics considered to be unsavory. The exploitation film as an entity and an industry apart from the mainstream began to appear around 1920, as I detail in chapter 1. Restrictive efforts in the years immediately following World War I were directed primarily at sex hygiene films, driving the subject out of the mainstream and creating an industry apart that made films on topics that major companies would no longer approach. With the Thirteen Points or Standards (1921), the “Don’ts and Be Carefuls” (1927), and the Motion Picture Production Code (1930), the organized industry detailed the “salacious” subjects that it would no longer allow in its movies. Exploitation films literally exploited this state of affairs by making pictures on almost all the topics forbidden by those mechanisms.

After World War II, changes in the film industry’s structure, shifting social mores, and bellwether court decisions eased censorship restrictions. Revisions of the Production Code left sex perversion and VD the only verboten subjects by 1956. The release of Russ Meyer’s *The Immoral Mr. Teas* in 1959 initiated a whole new class of exploitation films, the “nudie-cutie.” With censorship challenges aimed at those films regularly dismissed by the courts and a growing crop of more daring Hollywood releases, 1959 appears to be an end point of classical exploitation given the criteria set forth above. Although movies that could qualify as classical

exploitation continued to be made and released after this point, they were rare, increasingly displaced by the more explicit “sexploitation” movie. Thus, I consider the four decades roughly bounded by 1919 and 1959 to be the era of classical exploitation film. It is also worth noting that the beginning of this period coincides with the emergence of the United States as a modern, urban, industrial society shucking off many agrarian attitudes and traditions, and ends with what is usually considered the opening of the “sexual revolution.” The existence of the classical exploitation film not only coincides with the classical Hollywood cinema, but parallels and speaks of an era of significant social change in America.

Classical exploitation films were disreputable when they were originally released, and the mainstream industry went to great lengths to stamp them out. Histories of the motion picture medium passed them by. Their current position as part of the “bad film” cult accords them the status of curiosity at best, continued dismissal at worst. These factors contribute to the relative lack of prior research on exploitation films, academic or otherwise.²¹ Given their disparaged nature and the general paucity of information on exploitation, how does one investigate a phenomenon that is little more than a shadow?

When I began to research this project, the lack of information on exploitation films was a particularly vexing problem. My academic training had stressed archival work. I had done research in the David O. Selznick archive, where there were five memos and three cables to document every belch that emanated from the legendary producer; one could expect the amount of documentation to triple if the production of a movie was actually involved. When it came to conducting research on exploitation films, there were no catalogues or comprehensive lists in existence. Even though many of the movies claimed copyright, the majority were never registered; they were only sporadically covered in the trades and were mentioned even less frequently in news magazines, dailies, or other periodicals that regularly reviewed motion pictures. My research process began by compiling a working list of titles that seemed to conform to the definition of exploitation films by digging through the *AFI Catalog*, *Film Daily Yearbooks*, and existing reviews, as well as scouring over forty years of *Variety*. Cross-referencing these sources with copyright records, censorship files, an unannotated list of holdings in the Sonney Collection at the UCLA Film and Television Archive, as well as extant posters, stills, and advertising materials eventually yielded hundreds of titles. Though this may sound like the worst kind of drudgery, it was actually the kind of

detective work that makes the process of historical research invigorating. I have generally erred on the side of inclusion in the filmography, hoping that additional information or evidence about the nature of some films will be found. Still, a number of movies that received only limited release undoubtedly escaped my detection. This relates to the second problem that became evident during my research: classical exploitation movies were often retitled a number of times over the years and in different territories; in some cases, a single picture may have been known by as many as five or six titles, creating a good deal of confusion in the identification process.

The films themselves were, initially, difficult to see. Only a handful were on what has become that most valuable, if problematic, tool for the film historian, the videocassette. The single largest concentration of exploitation films open to the researcher is the Sonney Collection at the UCLA Film and Television Archive. I was able to screen many films there, but some are unviewable due to nitrate deterioration or other problems. Since that time, many of the UCLA holdings have made their way into video release through Mike Vraney of Something Weird Video in Seattle working with David Friedman, former partner of Dan Sonney. Something Weird's series, dubbed "David Friedman's Roadshow Rarities," has brought previously unobtainable titles to the home screen as well as improved prints or more complete copies of movies that were already in circulation. Moreover, Something Weird's release of titles in the Sonney Collection has helped to dislodge films from private hands around the country. The company recently located and issued a print of *Street Corner* (1948), a film I had largely given up hope of ever seeing. Yet despite Something Weird's efforts, other exploitation titles are still lost, probably never to be seen by modern audiences.

Of course, problems do not end when an exploitation film is made available for viewing through an archive or on videotape. Mainstream motion pictures, especially after 1934, were almost always the same whether seen in Detroit or Des Moines, St. Louis or Sarasota. The Production Code and the studio system ensured uniformity to keep local censors' cuts to a minimum. On the other hand, an exploitation film that passed the censors in Ohio might be significantly different from prints of the film approved by the censor board in Kansas. Censored versions could, in turn, be very different from prints of the film that played in states or cities that did not have censorship. And differences were not just limited to cuts. In some areas, states' rights distributors would add footage, including "square-up

reels” of racy material. When an old film was reissued, newer footage might be incorporated to maintain its topicality or to increase the amount of exploitable spectacle between the first and last reels. Distinctions among “uncensored,” “unedited,” or “director’s” cuts become tangled, if not entirely moot, because of the fluid, ever changing nature of exploitation releases. Of the more than five hundred motion pictures in the main section of the filmography (appendix 2), I have screened approximately 30 percent, constituting dozens of features and shorts. Inevitably, the selection of films was dictated by availability. I cannot profess that it is an unbiased or random sample, but I believe it is broadly representative of exploitation films in general and of the various subcategories in particular.

If the movies themselves have often been difficult to identify or see, uncovering information about the individuals and companies that produced them was hard and in some cases impossible to obtain. The people who made exploitation movies ran small operations at best, and in some instances outfits could best be classified as fly-by-night. They apparently did not keep extensive records. Due to the disreputable nature of their films, most of the exploiters kept fairly low profiles; unlike their Hollywood counterparts, there was little to be gained by notoriety. The studio system generated a mountain of paper, much of which is now archived for scholarly use; the equivalent mole hill generated by the exploiters does not exist. Some primary documents, mostly in private collections, have netted valuable information. Records collected by Mike Vraney and several boxes of material of Dallas-based distributor O. K. Bourgeois in a private collection contain exhibition files and budgets. The archives of the New York State Censors and the Production Code Administration provide valuable insight into the way the producers and distributors of exploitation negotiated censorship issues.

Lacking a sufficient quantity of paper records, I have had to rely on oral history to confirm hypotheses, elaborate on hunches, and fill in gaps. Regrettably, most of the major producers of exploitation film had died by the early 1980s. Much of what I had learned about the production of exploitation films has come from interviews or letters from those who were associated with producers and distributors in some way, including Dan Sonney, whose father was an exploitation pioneer and who was involved in the business himself from the 1930s. Hildegard Esper, screenwriter and wife of exploiter Dwain Esper, provided insight and anecdotes about the Esper operation and her role as a writer of exploitation movies. Lili St. Cyr, one of the major stars of burlesque films of the 1950s, an-

swered questions about that genre and her work in it. Director and editor Robert C. Derteano, Florence Kirby, the widow of exploiteer Klaytan W. Kirby, and the late Gidney Talley Jr., whose father owned *The Story of Bob and Sally* and who did some roadshowing himself, all provided valuable information. An ongoing dialogue in letters, phone calls, and meetings with David Friedman has provided me with answers to many questions and stimulated me to pose even more. Though memories have sometimes been cloudy and some details have been lost to time, in lieu of comprehensive records these accounts serve as what is often the only historical record.

How, then, does one construct a history of a subject when many of the traditional avenues open to the historian are closed or, at best, filled with holes and obstacles? George Lipsitz has noted that the dominant model of historical inquiry relies on a presumably “objectivist” relationship between the historian and a set of documents in which the scholar attempts to “‘find’ concrete evidence to support arguments.” He goes on to explain that this method “innately privileges the experiences of those able to leave some kind of printed documentary evidence over the experiences of those who are silenced, and it underestimates the degree to which facts are also interpretations in that they are aspects of reality singled out for notice because of some subjective judgment.”²² Instead of approaching exploitation films with an argument that demands support, I have come to them with a series of questions: Were exploitation films different from those motion pictures coming out of the Hollywood studio system, and if so, how? How were exploitation films produced, distributed, and exhibited, and were the practices of the exploiteers viable in the system dominated by Hollywood? What was the nature of the relationship between the mainstream industry and the “shadow cinema” of exploitation film? How did the exploitation filmmakers operate in such a (presumably) restrictive atmosphere? What was the relationship between the films and their audiences as well as different social institutions? And finally, what did exploitation films express to their original audiences? Although some of the questions are obviously based on presuppositions, they can only be answered by examining existing evidence.

This brings us to the ultimate question: Why is a history of classical exploitation films necessary? If the films were so bad, if they were and continue to exist on the fringes of culture, why consider them at all? In some measure, this project can be considered “revisionist” history—not because it revises the history of exploitation films, for such a history has not heretofore existed, but because it can be seen as one of a number of

recent or ongoing projects that attempt to redress past imbalances in our conception of film history. Just as Hollywood dominated production, it has also dominated the academic study of American film. Looking at questions of industrial practice has expanded the spotlight to include B films and other cinemas given little recognition by the mainstream industry and its critics. The independent African American cinema, amateur filmmaking, regional movements, and other forms that have been traditionally left out of the mix are being reintegrated into film history. Exploitation movies were a truly marginal, or liminal, form, existing in a place “in between.” The films often played in grindhouses, theaters located in that physical space between the commercial areas and the skid row districts of many major cities. They played in neighborhood or small-town theaters in between runs of regular Hollywood pictures. Moreover, exploitation films fell into other liminal domains such as that between Hollywood and the hard-core stag reel, between documentary and narrative, between entertainment and education, and between art and obscenity. This study is aligned with those efforts that attempt to disassemble the canon in film studies, both to reinforce a broader definition of culture and to better understand its role in everyday life.

A second reason to study these films is that, as Peter Stallybrass and Allon White write in *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, “what is socially peripheral is so frequently symbolically central.”²³ I find that that little aphorism has become something of a standard fixture in my work, yet it is such a simple and compelling proposition that for those who study history and culture it cannot be ignored. Looking at the marginalized exploitation industry serves to direct our attention to the centrality that issues of sex, drug use, nudity, prostitution, and other “transgressive” behaviors played in American society from World War I through the late 1950s. Through the study of exploitation films, we gain insight into the way American society grappled with these complex issues. The approach the movies took to their subjects accounts for some of this controversy, but it was the very topics at the heart of the films that tended to attract most of the rancor directed at them. If the vast majority of Hollywood pictures were about the American ideal of homogeneity and those things that bound us together geographically, socially, and politically, then exploitation films were about difference. In exploitation films, we find our society constructing many of its myths about “the Other.” Of course, exploitation movies do not tell us as much about the Other as they do about the fears and anxieties of those who made and saw the movies:

working- and middle-class whites steeped in Judeo-Christian morality and the Puritan work ethic. As I will show, the tensions between an older, production-based economy and an emerging consumer culture largely determined these fears, many of which remain unresolved. For this reason, a number of the themes in the current debates about drugs, sexually transmitted diseases such as AIDS, and the way these issues are presented in the media parallel earlier arguments made in and directed at exploitation movies. Thus, this book is not just a history of an obscure and decidedly odd group of motion pictures, but a history of American attitudes about pleasure and desire.

Third, this book provides an understanding of how exploitation film functioned as an alternative to Hollywood while also shedding light on the mainstream motion picture business. When Hollywood abrogated any claim to the topics that would become exploitation's province, exploitation film became the object of Hollywood's "displaced abjection," "the process whereby 'low' social groups turn their figurative and actual power, not against those in actual authority, but against those who are even 'lower.'"²⁴ In other words, Hollywood as a cultural institution was subordinate to other, "higher," arts: painting and sculpture, theater, and opera. The organized film industry denigrated exploitation films, creating barriers to their distribution and exhibition, as a way of elevating the stature of its own product. But as I will show, the mainstream industry also depended on the contrast of exploitation to construct its own image as a responsible business and to present its films as wholesome, artistic, and, above all, entertaining. An understanding of the mainstream industry's rejection of exploitation subject matter and its relationship with the exploiters provides us with a more complete picture of Hollywood, its mission as a maker of meaning for the culture, and its self-defined role as an intellectual and social force.

Of course, there is often an impulse to see the marginal or transgressive as somehow more authentic than the mainstream, containing the power to subvert dominant systems and values. There can be no doubt that exploitation films presented what was the most sustained domestic challenge to Hollywood's hegemony over aesthetics and content in the commercial cinema. By shaking the entrenched industry's definitions of acceptable form and subject matter, exploitation paved the way for the greater freedoms the screen began to enjoy in the years following World War II. Moreover, by simply invoking certain issues, exploitation films offered a degree of freedom for women and men who had little access to

information on sex and other topics at a time when such knowledge was restricted by law as well as social convention. At the same time, exploitation films' cautionary tales in which the pursuit of individual pleasure leads to disaster tended to discourage expressions of that desire in favor of sentiments of hard work and deferred gratification that characterized an earlier era. Warren Susman has described the fundamental conflict in twentieth-century America as being "between two cultures—an older culture, often loosely labeled Puritan-republican, producer capitalist culture, and a newly emerging culture of abundance . . . a significant and profound clash between different moral orders."²⁵ Drawing on Lawrence Birken's analysis of the emergence of "sexology," I show how exploitation movies embodied the tensions between the older economic system rooted in the ideology of productivity and the developing consumer-based economy. What this points to is the inadvisability of pigeonholing exploitation films, of either valorizing or demonizing them.²⁶ Like the culture that produced them, exploitation films were complex and filled with contradictions. This will become abundantly clear.

"*Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!*" is organized into two major sections. The first part operates as an industrial history. Chapter 1 uncovers the origins of exploitation films as they emerged from a series of restrictions placed on sex hygiene movies made around the time of World War I. Chapter 2 focuses on the mode of production of the films and their resulting style. Distribution, advertising, and exhibition constituted some of the major points of divergence between Hollywood films and classical exploitation movies, and they are the subject of chapter 3. In chapter 4, I look at the relationship the exploiteers had with censors on the state and local level, with representatives of the Hays Office, and with other powerful figures in the industry, such as Martin Quigley, publisher of *Motion Picture Herald*. The second part of the book examines the major categories of classical exploitation films. In each chapter, I situate the particular category, representative texts, and their reception within the broader discourses surrounding the topic, for instance, sex hygiene or drug use. This begins with the sex hygiene movie in chapter 5. Chapter 6 covers drug movies, and chapter 7 discusses vice, exotic, and atrocity films. In chapter 8, I explore the two exploitation genres that focused on nudity, nudist films and burlesque movies. The book concludes with a discussion of the factors that led to the decline and eventual disappearance of classical exploitation films.

16 Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!

I would like to be able to say that a book of this size and scope is the last word on exploitation films; I'm not that disingenuous nor that delusional. Each of these chapters could easily constitute a book in itself. Most of the films discussed deserve far greater analysis, and dozens of fascinating movies are not even mentioned in the text. But at least this book serves as a beginning. To paraphrase the opening of many an exploitation film, it is my sincere hope that by pulling back the veil of ignorance that has surrounded this topic for so long, we will all be able to lead happier, richer lives . . . or, to be a bit more reasonable, that we will broaden our understanding of American film history.

1. "An Attempt to 'Commercialize Vice'"

Origins of the Exploitation Film

The entire motion picture industry has recently come in for severe criticism on account of such so-called health films as *Fit to Win* and *The End of the Road*, with which the recognized producers had nothing to do. One young girl, after attending a public presentation of one of these, said, "I never want to see another movie!"

—*Photoplay* magazine, 1919

Exploitation films are usually thought of as ethically dubious, industrially marginal, and aesthetically bankrupt. That they emerged from the mainstream industry, indeed, that their origins can be traced to respectable films made with the alleged "good intentions" of decreasing human suffering, is another paradox surrounding exploitation. But progressivism, the movement that gave birth to these films and was then instrumental in suppressing them, was itself filled with paradoxes. Progressivism was not a coherent ideology but a series of political, economic, and social reform movements that flourished in the early twentieth century. Some progressives were strictly concerned with the welfare of farmers and the agricultural sector. Some attempted to curtail the power of industry through "trust busting"; others looked to industry for management solutions with which to cure some social ills. Some progressives favored reinvigorating political energies of the people through populism; others sought to em-

power a new class of technocratic experts. Some attempted to improve the lot of newly arrived immigrants to America's cities; others hoped to keep them out. Arthur S. Link and Richard L. McCormick note that "different reformers sometimes favored the same measure for distinctive, even opposite, reasons. Progressivism could be understood only in the light of these shifting coalitions."¹ What the progressives did share was a concern over the consequences of industrialism, an interventionist stance, and a Protestant moralism that could be justified through scientific disciplines such as statistics, sociology, and psychology.² The progressives "made the first efforts to grapple with the ills of a modern urban-industrial society."³

The cycle of white slave films that appeared in the early teens can be seen as precursors to the development of exploitation films. These films about the supposed traffic in white slavery—the buying and selling of girls and women for the purposes of prostitution—were the result of progressive anxiety over industrialization and the growth of the cities. They foreshadowed exploitation films in their promise of titillation, their professed educational mission, their topicality, and their construction of a social Other—the prostitute, in this instance.⁴ To locate the origin of exploitation films, we must look to another series of motion pictures spawned by progressive reform: the sex hygiene film. In the course of just five years, the sex hygiene film moved from being relatively common and accepted to being the scourge of the young movie industry. Censorship efforts directed at hygiene films not only excised the subject from the mainstream but served to create a separate industry that began to make films on topics that Hollywood would no longer approach.⁵ As a result of censorship, the exploitation film emerged as a distinct class of motion picture, existing alongside the classical Hollywood cinema from the late teens to the late fifties.

To understand the controversy that surrounded and resulted in the suppression of sex hygiene films, it is necessary to examine the social evaluation of venereal diseases and their treatments in the years prior to World War I. Medical progress throughout the nineteenth century had increased physicians' knowledge about the systemic threat of syphilis and the seriousness of gonorrhea. Yet the diseases were also attended by a social stigma that led many physicians to adopt the attitude that patients who suffered from the maladies were only receiving their due for moral transgressions.⁶ In his social history of venereal disease, Allan M. Brandt states, "Because of misunderstandings of the pathology of the disease, as well as a desire to avoid the moral opprobrium attached to venereal infec-

tion, physicians often ascribed deaths due to syphilis to other causes.”⁷ Prince A. Morrow, the progressive physician who led the fight against venereal diseases at the turn of the century, claimed in 1901 that from 5 to 18 percent of all men carried syphilitic infections.⁸

Such efforts to call attention to and combat venereal diseases were certainly designed to decrease pain and death. However, the attention to sexually transmitted diseases accorded by Morrow and other progressive physicians stemmed not so much from the desire for accuracy in recording a cause of death as from fears that venereal diseases were among the major reasons for declining birthrates among the middle class, a phenomenon labeled “race suicide.”⁹ As Brandt notes, “Morrow’s view demonstrated the wide-spread medical concern about the declining size of the white, middle-class family and provided a means for members of the profession to join the debate about the future of domesticity.”¹⁰ The gravity that progressive physicians attached to the potential decline of the white, middle-class family is also related to an attendant fear of the lower classes. Brandt elaborates:

The substantial professional interest and popular anxiety that extra-genital infections generated . . . reflected concern about changes in American society during the late nineteenth century, particularly the heterogeneity and unhygienic nature of the burgeoning cities. Innocent infections promoted apprehension of the city, the working class, and the new immigrant populations, ultimately encouraging racism, and nativism. Progressive unease about hygiene, contagion, and cleanliness were evoked in the belief that in the brief contacts of everyday life—at the grocery, in the park, at the barber shop—these infections, originally obtained in “immoral” circumstances, could be passed to native, middle-class “moral” Americans. . . . Venereal diseases had become, preeminently, a disease of the “other,” be it the other race, the other class, the other ethnic group.¹¹

Brandt’s contention that underlying concerns about sexual diseases were phobias of contamination by nondominant social groups is confirmed by period hygiene books and articles.

In a 1921 booklet, *The Control of Sex Infections*, J. Bayard Clark laid much of the blame for the spread of VD on modern industry and the working class. Clark wrote that professional prostitutes were not the largest source of the diseases because they knew how to stay free from infection. Instead, he pointed to working girls from shops and factories, servants, “and those who idle at home” as responsible for almost three-quarters of recorded

infections. “This is doubly unfortunate,” Clark wrote, “as these girls not yet cut off from self-respecting sources of support still carry the hope of husbands and homes. Let us now move backward, as it were, and see if we can tell where the responsibility rests for this group of infected and often-times sexually ruined industrial workers who ignorantly spread the majority of sexual havoc to all classes of society.”¹² Clark identified industrialism, which put young women to work while in “the flower of maternal possibility,” as the source of the spread of venereal diseases.¹³ And he located in the working class the conduit that carried “the social evil” from the lower classes to the middle and upper classes.

In a similar vein, a paper delivered at the National Conference of Social Work in 1919 by Edgar Sydenstricker of the U.S. Public Health Service quoted statistics showing 5.5 percent of white army cadets “‘representative of the better class of young men found in our colleges’” suffered from venereal disease, as compared to 16 percent or more of recruits “regarded as representative of ‘mechanics, artisans, and untrained laborers.’”¹⁴ Sydenstricker suggested that those in the lower economic strata were faced with conditions that led to “increasing sexual excitement and . . . lowering self-restraint.” He continued: “There hardly will be any disagreement on the general observation that among the economically less favored group of our population these conditions are far more pronounced than among the well-to-do. These influences arise not only from the conditions which directly stimulate sexual activity but also from the conditions of living. The lack of healthful recreation and avocational opportunities, the monotony of daily life and work, the brevity of formal education—these factors which may be considered just as seriously as the more direct and positive forces that lower the standard of morality and tend towards vulgarity and grossness of thought.” Whether because of social conditions or “direct and positive forces that lower the standard of morality,” the upper and middle classes had located the source of venereal disease in the lower classes.

The fullest expression of this class doctrine can be found in the ideology underlying the pseudoscience known as eugenics. The eugenics movement was an attempt to combat “race suicide” by encouraging the “fit” white, Anglo-Saxon, middle and upper classes to have large families and “better babies” while attempting to reduce the growth of the “unfit” lower classes through means ranging from immigration restriction to sterilization. The threats posed to the status and power of the bourgeoisie by immigrants and the lower classes drew financial support for the eugenics movement

from many bankers and businessmen. Writing about the movement, Thomas M. Shapiro notes that “by focusing on both class and racial challenges, the propertied class simultaneously united on the basis of class consolidation and segmented the working class along race and ethnic lines.” He suggests that eugenics gradually spread from the upper classes throughout society to become the pervasive ideology, nurturing attitudes of “racism, superiority, and outright hatred among the American people—all in the name of science.”¹⁵ Discourses on venereal disease and eugenics were so tightly intertwined as often to be inseparable.¹⁶

The problems of venereal disease were exacerbated by what came to be known as the “conspiracy of silence.” Although physicians spoke of venereal diseases among themselves, little information was available to the society at large. In 1906 Edward Bok, editor of the *Ladies’ Home Journal*, published a series of articles on VD. His effort resulted in the loss of seventy-five thousand subscriptions.¹⁷ As Morrow claimed in 1906, “Social sentiment holds that it is a greater violation of the properties of life publicly to mention venereal disease than privately to contract it.”¹⁸ The same sentiment was echoed fifteen years later by Clark as he spoke about “a subject which polite society has seemingly not cared to meet face on.”¹⁹ Ironically, the conspiracy of silence prevented the lower classes, who were identified as the cause of venereal diseases, from receiving medical and preventive information about them. As Brandt notes, Margaret Sanger’s pamphlet, *What Every Girl Should Know*, was confiscated by the U.S. Post Office in 1912 because its references to syphilis and gonorrhea were considered obscene under the Comstock Law.²⁰ Although the “conspiracy of silence” was relieved somewhat in 1909 when Paul Erlich developed a viable treatment for syphilis, the heartening information about prophylactic measures was counterbalanced by moralists who claimed that dissemination of the knowledge would encourage sexual promiscuity.

Science offered new hope for sufferers of syphilis, but this was militated by old moral interdictions as issues of class and sexuality kept tensions high. It was in this highly charged atmosphere that the first play to attack directly the problem of venereal disease was produced in the United States. Some novels had obliquely referred to venereal disease, and Ibsen’s *Ghosts*, with its references to Oswald’s “hereditary illness,” had been produced in America as early as 1882. But it was Eugene Brieux’s *Damaged Goods* that pulled back the veil of secrecy that cloaked venereal disease and spoke the word syphilis on stage for the first time.²¹ In 1913 Brieux’s play was staged in New York City, produced under the auspices of the *Medical Review of*

Reviews to stave off possible public protest.²² The drama told the story of a young man who contracts syphilis. He marries to collect a dowry despite the protests of his physician, eventually infecting his wife and baby. Lacking much dramatic action, the play was often described as a “preachment” or “medical sermon.” Its staid tone and the sponsorship of the *Medical Review of Reviews* combined to keep opposition to a minimum.²³

Damaged Goods was endorsed by many in New York society, who engaged boxes for the initial “special” performance.²⁴ In a feature story, the *New York Times* said that the play had been given “the approval of many of our leading men and women” and that a special performance had been arranged for President Woodrow Wilson and the Congress in Washington, D.C.²⁵ Most reviews of the production rhetorically asked if the stage were the proper place for the discussion of venereal disease yet concluded that Brieux’s play served a useful purpose.²⁶ A review from *Hearst’s Magazine* is representative: “I would wish to take a young boy or girl of mine to see this play. If they could get harm out of it, I confess I do not understand how. . . . This play puts the horrible truth in so living a way, with such clean, artistic force, that the mind is impressed as it could possibly be impressed in no other manner.”²⁷ A *New York Times* editorial conceded the good that could come from dramatic treatment of “subjects generally considered too delicate for common conversation,” but concluded, “It invariably causes harm, too, by its appeal to the merely curious and morbid minds.”²⁸ Nevertheless, the conspiracy of silence had been broken and venereal diseases became legitimate subject matter for drama. “*Damaged Goods*,” writes Brandt, “became a symbol of a new sexual openness.”²⁹

It was only a short time before *Damaged Goods* and its star and driving force, Richard Bennett, made the transition from the stage to the screen. Scenarist Harry Pollard expanded Brieux’s chamber play for the American Film Manufacturing Company, and the film was released by Mutual in late 1914. In a letter to the *New York Times* in 1952, Terry Ramsaye described the movie as a prestige production, claiming that it was “pretentiously made, for that day, at a cost, including promotional expenses, of less than \$50,000, and its states’ rights . . . sold for \$600,000, thus indicating a boxoffice take of probably more than \$2,000,000.”³⁰ Ramsaye claimed that the production required special promotion and commanded higher ticket prices. Reviewers for the industry trade magazines seemed to be caught up in a progressive fervor when they discussed the film. *Variety*’s reviewer urged, “See *Damaged Goods*, and after seeing it, tell your son or daughter to see it, and let them tell other boys and girls, and you tell other fathers

and mothers, until all the world has seen *Damaged Goods* on the picture screen.”³¹ *The Moving Picture World* found the film “free from taint which inheres in most of the ‘sex problem plays.’ It does not parade evil in order that good may come of it.”³²

What was being praised? For one thing, the reviews took special note of the social status of the protagonist. George Dupont was described as “a young man of excellent home,” a lawyer by profession, who is set to marry “a prominent society belle.” George gets syphilis from a “street walker.”³³ Annette Kuhn notes that “VD propaganda films . . . construct sexually active women as the principal cause of venereal infection”; it is also important to note the low social station of those women and how the disease is visited upon those of the upper classes.³⁴ The social dynamics established in *Damaged Goods*, and repeated in most other hygiene films of the period, illustrate Brandt’s claim that venereal disease was seen as a malady of the Other inflicted on the bourgeoisie.

Sander L. Gilman has described the Other as that onto which we project our anxieties, externalizing our loss of control. The Other is not random, nor is it isolated from historical context. He suggests that when a group makes demands on a society, “the status anxiety produced by those demands characteristically translates into a sense of loss of control. Thus a group that has been marginally visible can suddenly become the definition of the Other.”³⁵ Gilman goes on to describe how difference, in a variety of guises, threatens order and control: “This mental representation of difference is but the projection of the tension between control and its loss present within each individual in every group. The tension produces an anxiety that is given shape as the Other. The Other is protean because of its source, the conflicts within the individual as articulated in the vocabulary of the group. Qualities of the Other readily form patterns with little or no relationship to any external reality.”³⁶ Industrial workers, immigrants, and blacks from the South were moving to America’s great cities in tremendous numbers in the 1910s. At times, these groups made specific demands regarding working and living conditions; at other times, they appeared to require special treatment to be socialized or broken of “bad” habits or traditions. Such demands, or the perception of demands, led to a sense of loss of control over the reproduction of a class and a way of life, resulting in the middle and upper-middle classes projecting their fears on groups with lower status.

In *Damaged Goods*, the catastrophe that visits George was brought about by a related error. The film version of Brieux’s play features a bach-

el or party thrown for George by his friends. He gets drunk and spends the night with a prostitute, acquiring the disease from a momentary failing of standards. Alcohol was often cited as a contributing factor in the spread of venereal disease, and hygiene pictures assimilated this notion.³⁷ In *Damaged Goods*, as well as its successors, the consumption of alcohol frequently occurs, resulting in the bourgeois hero dropping his guard and engaging in social (and sexual) intercourse with the lower class. The audience was encouraged to view drinking as wrong not because of some innate moral doctrine or sin but because it broke down social discriminations, allowing a mingling of the classes. Lower classes then spread venereal diseases to the bourgeoisie, rendering wives sterile and babies diseased or dead, with the middle class facing “race suicide.” The temperance and eugenics movements merged in *Damaged Goods* as George gives syphilis to his wife and their child is born with the disease. Morality became class doctrine rather than religious dogma in the early sex hygiene films.³⁸

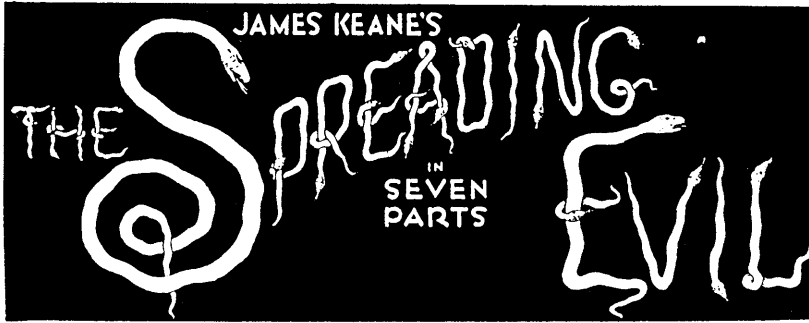
Just who made up the audience for the early sex hygiene films is difficult to determine. In any case, we can be assured that the films were successful. A 1915 article in *The Moving Picture World* spoke of *Damaged Goods*’ run in Detroit: “The Grand Circus started to show *Damaged Goods* on Monday, Oct. 18, and has placed [*sic*] to capacity every performance. The Grand Circus only seats about 650 and the total daily attendance averaged 5,000 people. In the evenings the crowd has been so large that three policemen were sent over by the police department to keep the people in line and from blocking the sidewalks. Manager Blankmeyer will run *Damaged Goods* at least four weeks.”³⁹ The same article also indicated the willingness of distributors to exploit the hot topic of sex hygiene in its reference to a 1913 film, *A Victim of Sin*, put in release to capitalize on the success of *Damaged Goods*. *A Victim of Sin* appears to have been almost identical to the Brioux work in structure and detail. It followed the story of a rising young medical student who falls in love with the daughter of a prominent banker, becomes infected with a venereal disease after spending an evening in Bohemia with friends, and returns to his hometown, where he is overcome by “a moment of forgetfulness,” resulting in the pregnancy of his fiancée. A child is born, “suffering the sins of his Father, but soon after birth, is relieved by the merciful hand of Death.”⁴⁰ Again, someone from society’s upper crust, a physician, suffers because of a sexual liaison with a member of the lower class.

Damaged Goods proved so popular on its initial run that it was re-released in 1917 following American military engagement along the Mexi-

can border. The newly acquired freedom to discuss the topic of venereal diseases had focused national attention on conditions in cantonments along the U.S. southern border, where troops had assembled to guard against raids by Pancho Villa in 1916. Saloons and red light districts contributed to a general air of moral laxity and fostered the concern among progressives and politicians alike that an army suffering from the ravages of venereal diseases was, in fact, no army at all. The Commission on Training Camp Activities (CTCA) was created in 1917 to battle VD among American armed forces through a program of planned recreation or distraction, and coercion. The progressive philosophy that posited education as a cure for all ills was bureaucratized in the CTCA with its program of “educational prophylaxis.”⁴¹

Concern about venereal disease was not limited to rowdy troops in far-flung outposts. Mark Thomas Connelly quotes a physician writing for the *Journal of Sociological Medicine* in 1917 claiming that the actual number of cases of VD in a large city was one hundred times greater than the official reports indicated. According to Connelly, the article “manifestly articulated the contemporary belief that venereal disease was rampant and *out of control*, a belief just as vital in focusing medical and public attention on the problem of prostitution and venereal disease as the concurrent explosion of new medical knowledge of the nature and consequences of venereal infection.”⁴² Connelly’s characterization of contemporary beliefs holding that venereal diseases were “out of control” is important. Exploitation films generally followed when discourse on a given issue or problem reached a convulsive state. The white slave scare around 1913 served as the spark for a series of films and, as we shall see, the pattern was repeated with venereal disease pictures in the late teens, nudist films in the early 1930s, antidope movies during the marijuana scare in the mid-1930s, vice ring pictures following Lucky Luciano’s racketeering conviction in 1936, the postwar hygiene films, more narcotic movies in the early 1950s, and so on. Exploitation films were fueled by moral panic.

In 1919 eight new sex hygiene films, along with another rerelease of *Damaged Goods*, hit American screens in rapid succession. At the vanguard of the postwar wave of sex hygiene features was *The Spreading Evil*, produced by James Keane and released in the last months of 1918. Though complicated by a story of wartime intrigue, the theme of venereal disease penetrating the upper strata of society from the lower classes was once again evident.⁴³ The film received the enthusiastic endorsement of Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels. *The Moving Picture World* praised the film for



2 Not a war picture in the conventional sense, James Keane's *The Spreading Evil* (1918) was about the war on syphilis.

its frankness, noting that “the production must be given credit for setting forth every phase of its story with acceptable delicacy.”⁴⁴ *Variety* fairly trumpeted, “We are moving rapidly in the advancement of civilization! Only a very short time ago an educational film of the undoubted value of *The Spreading Evil* would not have been permitted by the authorities.”⁴⁵

At the beginning of 1919, *The Scarlet Trail* was added to the group of films that illustrated the effects of venereal disease on the middle class. In it, a corrupt financier threatens the bourgeoisie with his uncontrolled avarice. Not only does Ezra Grafton head a syndicate of quack doctors who sell VD nostrums, but his son Bob was born with congenital syphilis. Bob, planning to marry a debutante, learns of his fate and eventually kills himself, leaving his father “crushed by the knowledge that he is reaping of his own iniquities.”⁴⁶ The film did not point directly to the lower classes as the breeding ground of syphilis, but did demonstrate the dangers inherent in the middle class letting its guard down: the threat comes from Bob, who could perpetuate his father’s disease among the bourgeoisie by marrying Ethel Harding. The film was widely praised for its inoffensiveness: “A disagreeable theme has been handled carefully”; “One point in the picture’s favor is the absence of suggestive scenes”; “[The director] may be

criticized, in fact, for being too delicate”; “The picture was made in a clean way.”⁴⁷

Up to and including the release of *The Scarlet Trail*, venereal disease pictures had been, above all, “clean.” The protests that they generated seem to have been attributable to the subject itself, a holdover from the conspiracy of silence, rather than their treatment of VD. Indeed, the earliest venereal disease films were evidently subjected to little pressure from censors. Perhaps this should not come as a surprise, as the films had little reason to be censored: they espoused morality and continence as a middle-class defense against the threat posed by subordinate classes. Moreover, the films were made by major companies or the large pool of undifferentiated independents and as such were part of mainstream commercial releases. Thus, the early sex hygiene films can be viewed as part of a social discourse taking place on a biological battlefield where class conflict was played out on an intimate level. VD was represented as tantamount to a revolutionary weapon of the poor, a weapon that posed a far greater threat to the middle class than bullets because it robbed the bourgeoisie of the chance to reproduce both their population and their ideologies. The “educational” aim of the films was to offer morality and continence as a shield for bourgeois protection, not to offer broader solutions that would benefit the underclass as well. Trade journals, newspapers, and censors—the forums, watchdogs, and arbiters of American middle-class tastes and agendas—had little reason to argue with the films that cautioned against “the evils that threaten our future race unless we act now and act quickly.”⁴⁸

What, then, explains the dramatic reversal in the reception of sex hygiene films in 1919 after the release of *The Scarlet Trail*? The backlash against the venereal disease pictures is linked to three films produced by the CTCA as armed service training films: *Fit to Fight* (1918), *Fit to Win* (1919), and *The End of the Road* (1918). Ironically, it was these state-supported films that brought about the suppression of the sex hygiene film and the institution of exploitation movies. *Fit to Fight* traced the adventures—and brushes with VD—of five young men of divergent backgrounds in an army training camp. *Fit to Win* was essentially the same film but with an added epilogue that takes place after the war.⁴⁹ *The End of the Road* was created to impart lessons about social diseases to a female audience and told the story of two young women.⁵⁰ Made during the war, the three films were turned over at war’s end by the CTCA to the American Social Hygiene Association (ASHA), an organization created by the merger

of two existing groups (the American Vigilance Association and the American Federation for Sex Hygiene) in 1913 to combat prostitution and venereal disease through education.⁵¹ ASHA placed the films under copyright and selected Isaac Silverman's Public Health Films to distribute them. Twenty-five percent of the profit from the pictures was to be returned to ASHA. Officials of the organization must have considered their decision to release the films to the general public to be a benevolent gesture toward a society in need of education about venereal disease. But authorities in the motion picture industry and municipal and state governments did not respond with anything akin to charity.

With the "war to make the world safe for democracy" just ended, *Fit to Win* was advertised as "The Opening Shot in the Big Battle To Make the World Clean and Safe For Posterity."⁵² In April 1919, Public Health Films ran a trade ad, reproducing a letter from Assistant Surgeon General C. C. Pierce addressed to state and municipal boards of health. The letter stated in part, "In carrying forward this campaign throughout civilian life, the United States Public Health Service asks the cooperation of State and Municipal governments and requests the abrogation or suspension of such censorships as might impede this very essential missionary work. *Fit to Win* will be shown to both men and women, but always separate screenings except where audiences may be absolutely segregated according to sex. Children under the age of sixteen will be rigorously excluded."⁵³ The letter indicated a suspicion that some censorship might be attempted. Moreover, it set out exhibition strategies that were to become standard for exploitation films as they matured in the 1920s: screenings segregated by gender and minimum age requirements.⁵⁴

The new films prompted far more caution on the part of reviewers. "Is *Fit to Win* fit to be shown is the first question that an exhibitor wants answered," stated *The Moving Picture World*. The journal concluded that under the proper circumstances, benefits could result, but that "It does not belong in a family theater to be shown to a mixed audience of men and women."⁵⁵ *Exhibitor's Trade Review* directed theater owners' attention to the prologue, which offered "actual views of diseased men and women with the ugly sores open to view."⁵⁶ One writer speculated that *Fit to Fight* "may have to be shown in the city dump."⁵⁷ Still, the films were apparently very popular with audiences. In May 1919, *Fit to Win* along with *The End of the Road* were "playing to capacity in the fifth week of a 12-week run" at the Grand opera house in Brooklyn.⁵⁸ *The End of the Road's* opening in a Syracuse theater drew fifteen hundred "at top dollar price" and did almost

\$9,000 in one week at a Philadelphia theater “with two shows a day and a 25 to one dollar scale.”⁵⁹

The *Mutual v. Ohio* decision, handed down by the Supreme Court in 1915, had left motion pictures without First Amendment armor. In spite of efforts to stave off any legal troubles with its ploy of segregated audiences and cautionary reviews, *Fit to Win* and its two companion films were the subject of tremendous censorship. In Dallas, censors deferred action while a team of physicians passed judgment: “Nauseating close-ups showing ravages of venereal disease on the human body will be lopped out of the film. So will the section that deals with the squalor of the vice district. This was too raw for the medicos, even though they did look at it from a scientific viewpoint.”⁶⁰ In New York City, *Fit to Win* was the subject of litigation when the city license commissioner, John Gilchrist, threatened to revoke the license of any theater showing the film. In court, Gilchrist claimed, “I believe that any film or picture dealing with the social evil, particularly with diseases arising out of the social evil are improper to present before mixed audiences.”⁶¹ The commissioner had acted after a letter, critical of the film, appeared in the *Brooklyn Eagle*.⁶² His authority to ban the film was eventually upheld by the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals.⁶³ *The End of the Road* was barred in Pennsylvania and was the subject of a vigorous campaign, instigated by the National Association of the Moving Picture Industry (NAMPI), to have it blocked in Chicago. The Providence, Rhode Island, Police Commission labeled the films “an attempt to ‘commercialize vice.’”⁶⁴

Why were the three government films subjected to such harsh censorship when the earlier films had not been? The most obvious reason for increased censorship seems to have been the graphic footage of the effects of venereal disease. Several efforts had already been directed at eliminating films that were sexually oriented or overly gruesome.⁶⁵ The nature and number of sex hygiene films in 1919 led to a critical mass. Stacie Colwell has questioned “the extent to which increasingly graphic depictions helped precipitate the ‘backlash’” against sex hygiene films.⁶⁶ Relying on government records from September 1918, she indicates that all hospital footage was cut from *The End of the Road* and prophylaxis footage was removed from *Fit to Fight*. Yet the reviews and trade paper stories on *Fit to Fight* and *Fit to Win* from 1919 refer to “ugly sores open to view” and “nauseating close-ups showing ravages of venereal disease.” National Board of Review documents (one from March 1919, one undated) in which reviewers were bothered by “the graphic nature” of *The End of the*

Road and “sicken[ed]” by shots of syphilitic lesions are further evidence that at least some of the material that was to have been eliminated was either not cut or, more likely, was reinserted by the distributor.⁶⁷

Second, the crisis surrounding the sex hygiene films occurred as motion picture production in the United States was settling in southern California and the industry attempted to upgrade its public image. More important, however, is the fact that the industry was stabilizing around the primary commodity of the feature-length narrative film. A series of conventions had developed around the narrative film to the point where any deviation from those conventions was seen as improper or inadequate. The educational aspect of the hygiene films, usually referred to as “propaganda,” set them apart from the conventions of narrative filmmaking.⁶⁸ Annette Kuhn has pointed out that in the hygiene films, characters operated as representatives of certain moral positions instead of as psychologically rounded individuals. I have identified five major character functions in the early hygiene films:

The Innocent: The Innocent is the young man or woman who, through ignorance about the ways of the world in general and sexual matters in particular, finds himself or herself in need of education. A male Innocent may contract VD from a prostitute or a “loose woman.” A female Innocent either contracts a venereal disease or becomes pregnant, often forcing her to seek an abortion. In other instances, the need for education may arise from a legitimate pregnancy in which the prospective mother requires information about childbirth. Although the Innocents’ actions may differ, their function—that of receiving proper education or demonstrating the need for education on sexual matters—always remains the same.

The Corrupter: The Corrupter is the man or woman who leads the Innocent down a path that is both injurious to the Innocent’s health and contravenes society’s formal sexual mores. The Corrupter may be a prostitute who gives a young man VD or a worldly man or insistent boy who seduces a girl, leaving her with a venereal disease or pregnant. As exploitation developed, theatrical agents or men posing as showbiz types often act in this capacity. The Corrupter may be conscious or unconscious of his or her actions. Minor versions of the Corrupter may also appear in a film in the form of friends or acquaintances who induce the Innocent to try alcohol or cigarettes or instigate a wild night on the town or a visit to a house of prostitution.

The Parents: Parents appear in two complementary, or contradictory, pairs in hygiene films. Good Parents are those who have given their children

proper sexual and moral instruction at an early age, arming the child with knowledge of how to avoid disease and unwanted pregnancy. Bad Parents are those who, through unreasonable modesty or self-centeredness, have failed to tell their children about sex, leaving them prey to the Corrupters of the world. Bad Parents are equated with the forces of ignorance in society.

The Crusader: The Crusader generally appears in the guise of a physician, a teacher, a public health officer, or a reporter. He—and the Crusader usually is a male character—either supports birth control, battles venereal disease and abortion, or engages in some combination of these. The Crusader is often in direct confrontation with the Bad Parents and local officials, who wish to maintain the status quo by standing in the way of sex education. The Crusader operates from a pragmatic point of view, often espousing a philosophy that may be at odds with the community but is proved to be in everyone's best interest in the final analysis. He is the man with a bitter pill that must be swallowed for the good of society. The Crusader often offers direct aid to the Innocent in his or her time of need and addresses both the characters in the film and the audience.

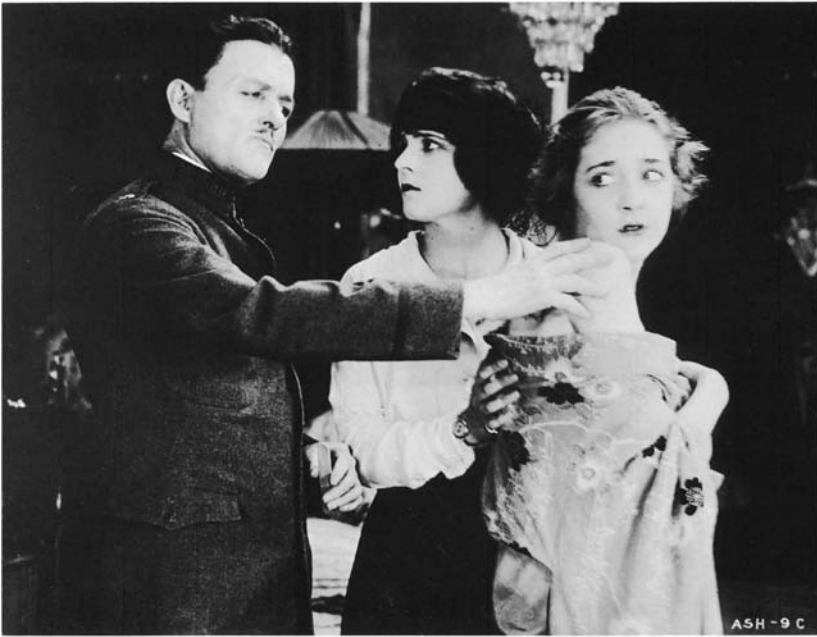
The Charlatan: The Charlatan is a physician, or someone posing as one, who takes advantage of the Innocent's condition and advances his or her suffering. The Charlatan may be a quack who offers nostrums for venereal diseases or illegal abortions. He—and the Charlatan is almost always male—is motivated solely by greed and has no regard for the health or welfare of those he attends. The Crusader works to expose the Charlatan.

Though they can be broken down into numerous subtypes, each of the major archetypes embodies a canon of beliefs that compel the character to act in a prescribed manner and propel the film along a fairly narrow trajectory. Education is at the axis of character function in the sex hygiene exploitation film and provides the locus for the discourse on social issues under examination. Each character functions to either receive, promote, stifle, or create the need for education about sex and reproductive health. The limited number of characters engaged in set functions contributes to relatively standardized story lines. Indeed, many of the plots of hygiene pictures appear to be scene-for-scene duplicates of earlier films. Once initial exposition has set the time and place of the film, a lack of education about one or more of the topics (birth control, abortion, etc.) is established. As Kuhn notes, rather than "identifying" with characters as in standard narrative film, audiences were "addressed as occupying a precisely identical position of ignorance and moral corruptibility as charac-

ters in the fiction.” The lack of knowledge shared by the characters and the audience was filled at the same moment.⁶⁹ This, in addition to scenes of documentary material on the diseases and their treatments that were inserted into a narrative framework, placed the sex hygiene feature “in a rather uneasy relation with contemporary approaches to cinematic narrativity.”⁷⁰ I will expand on the issue of formal properties of exploitation films and the controversy over mixing education with entertainment in succeeding chapters.

Beyond the unpleasant spectacle of disease and the awkward relationship to dominant cinematic practice, a study of the psychological effects of *Fit to Win* conducted at Johns Hopkins University by Karl S. Lashley and John B. Watson identified a series of criticisms of the film that point to other reasons for the widespread censorship. The first broad category of criticism identified was that based “upon purely sectarian concepts of morality.”⁷¹ A large segment of the leadership in the Catholic Church took a hard line on the government films and others released in 1919, organizing a pamphlet campaign against the films.⁷² These same sectarian criticisms might have greeted the earlier films but never in a quantity that prompted heavy censorship. The second category of criticism claimed that “the method of sex education by motion pictures is ineffective or that it will lead to specific anti-social alterations in behavior.”⁷³ Two of the criticisms enumerated in Lashley and Watson’s second category seem to have a direct bearing on the change in attitude about the films. First, the government-produced movies emphasized the importance of chemical prophylaxis, something earlier films did not do.⁷⁴ As Brandt points out, “The more conservative social hygienists and purity activists centered their attack on the films’ advocacy of chemical prophylaxis: ‘If you can’t be moral, be careful.’”⁷⁵ Information about prophylaxis was thought to counter messages about continence, thereby increasing immorality. Second, “The picture shows as a characteristic of the young men described in it a carelessness and lack of moral responsibility in sex matters which casts an unmerited reflection upon the decency of the average American home and of the Army.”⁷⁶

Furthermore, not only did the films pose prophylaxis as an alternative to continence, but *Fit to Fight*, *Fit to Win*, and *The End of the Road* did not locate the source of venereal diseases in the lower classes, as had the earlier films either directly or by implication. The five characters at the center of *Fit to Fight/Win* who are faced with the specter of VD are a mixed group. Billy Hale and Chick Carlton are college boys, Kid McCarthy is a boxer,



3 Richard Bennet (left), the star of *Damaged Goods* (1914), appeared as an army physician in *The End of the Road* (1919). Claire Adams (center) learns “the facts of life” and becomes a successful nurse; her friend, played by Joyce Fair (right), who did not receive sex instruction, contracts syphilis. (Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive)

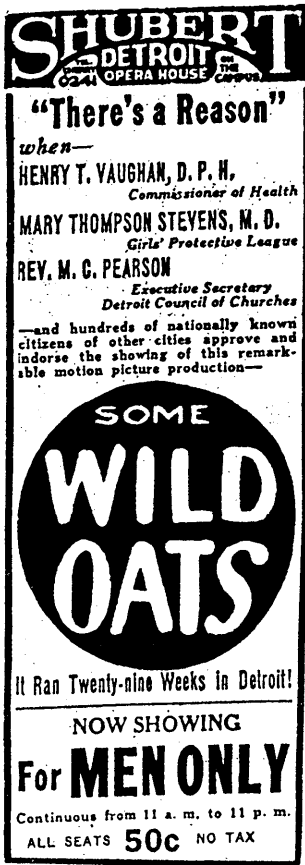
Hank Simpson a country bumpkin, and Jack Garvin is a cigar salesman. Thus, rather than invading a bourgeois home, venereal disease affects the egalitarian world of the military camp: members of all classes are equally at risk. *The End of the Road* tells the story of venereal disease having the same impact on the bourgeoisie as on the working class. No longer are the poor ruining middle-class lives through the transmission of venereal infections, leaving them to face the possibility of race suicide. In the government-made films, syphilis and gonorrhea are equal-opportunity diseases.

The issue of class-based differences in taste was another area of criticism these films faced. Although Lashley and Watson did not actually place class difference on their list of criticisms, they observed that “well-informed men and women” attacked the films as crude, inconsistent, tedious, and maudlin. On the other hand, “Sentiments which were ridiculed by the

medical and like groups were applauded vociferously by the carmen, soldiers, and others.” The researchers concluded: “In the criticism of sex hygiene pictures it is not infrequently evident that the critic has failed to consider this class distinction and that no small part of his criticism is a rationalization of his own revulsion against the driveling inanity of the story.”⁷⁷

Unlike the earlier hygiene films, such as *Damaged Goods*, the government films presented alternative representations of class. By placing middle-class protagonists on the same level as poorer victims of the disease, class differences were not perpetuated but broken down. As military training films, the pictures were designed to be egalitarian, to promote cooperation and a sense of shared experience among men from different places and classes so energies and efforts could be directed toward winning the war by “keeping fit to fight.” But following the war, with the status quo reestablished and reaffirmed and the class lines that had been erased by the leveling experience of military life redrawn, the films fell under attack. It should also be noted that in the wake of the war, “un-American” themes were frowned on to such an extent that NAMPI passed a resolution stating the industry’s “determination to maintain 100% Americanism upon the screens of this country as scrupulously as during the late emergency.”⁷⁸ The 100% Americanism of the war rapidly turned into the vicious nativism that gripped the United States in the 1920s, mistrustful of anything not white, Protestant, and conspicuously productive. Although no strict correlation was made between “un-American” propaganda and sex hygiene films while NAMPI was urging 100% Americanism, the trade association was also engaged in an effort to rid the nation’s screens of hygiene films. Furthermore, the fact that *Exhibitor’s Trade Review* placed boxed stories about “American ideas” and hygiene films on the same page as its report about the NAMPI convention indicates a tacit connection between the two issues. Thus, in addition to implying anticommunist, antforeigner, and non-Protestant, the term un-American may also have been a coded term for “un-middle-class.”

Finally, the CTCA films were criticized because they were part of a glut of sex hygiene films released in 1919. All of the films previously mentioned (with the possible exception of *A Victim of Sin*) were in release in 1919, along with three others, *Open Your Eyes*, *The Solitary Sin*, and *Wild Oats*. *Open Your Eyes*, one of the first films produced by the brothers Warner, followed the familiar formula: syphilis rising from the lower class to attack the bourgeoisie.⁷⁹ *The Solitary Sin*, the only film of the period to also deal



4 Samuel Cummins's
vD film *Wild Oats* (1919),
billed here as *Some Wild
Oats* for a Detroit run, was
criticized for its "coating
of vulgar humor." It
marked the beginning of
Cummins's long career in
exploitation.

with the subject of masturbation, is difficult to judge on the basis of the limited plot information available. However, *Wild Oats* offers another, more democratic view of victims and potential victims of syphilis with its rich city dweller/poor country cousin dichotomy.⁸⁰ Reviews of *Open Your Eyes* were positive, but those for *The Solitary Sin* and *Wild Oats* were less so.⁸¹ *Moving Picture World* criticized *The Solitary Sin* because "It does not succeed in keeping a pleasant side uppermost, as many of its predecessors have done."⁸² *Wild Oats* was damned for its "coating of vulgar humor."⁸³ Whatever the individual merits of these films, they were lumped with the CTCA films into what seemed to be an abundance of morbidly prurient motion pictures.

The general reaction to these other sex hygiene films paralleled the attitude toward the CTCA films: an unfavorable and, in some cases, hostile

response that went beyond negative reviews. Like the government films, they were widely censored. *Open Your Eyes* and *The Solitary Sin* were associated with *Fit to Win* and *The End of the Road* and barred in Providence, Rhode Island.⁸⁴ In Connecticut, a state law was enacted that forbade the public exhibition of “any stereopticon views or motion pictures in any way relating to the subject of venereal diseases without first securing a written permit from the state commissioner of health; and no person shall permit the exhibition of any such stereopticon views or motion pictures in any such building owned or controlled by him until such permit has been secured.” Violation of the Connecticut law was punishable by a \$500 fine, a six-month prison term, or both.⁸⁵ The Pennsylvania State Board of Censors banned any film that dealt with VD.⁸⁶ With the final decision in the New York City *Fit to Win* case in July 1919 came an editorial in *Exhibitor's Trade Review* that claimed to support sex hygiene campaigns, but added, “We part company with those who believe that the desired result will be gained by promiscuous exhibition of such pictures throughout the country.”⁸⁷ The editors went on to predict “a new storm” of censorship legislation and a crippling of the motion picture’s propaganda potential if the hygiene films continued.

Following its attempt in May to have *The End of the Road* barred, NAMPI gathered for its annual meeting in Rochester, New York, in August. At that meeting, a resolution was passed “unanimously declaring war to the bitter end on anyone making or showing salacious pictures and obligating themselves to submit every film to the National Board of Review.”⁸⁸ *Exhibitor's Trade Review* labeled the resolution “The Death Knell of Legalized Censorship and the ‘Educational’ Sex Film.”⁸⁹ In the 6 September 1919 edition of the same publication, a letter from Surgeon General Rupert Blue was published, which referred to an ad for *Some Wild Oats* (an alternative title for *Wild Oats*) that had appeared a month earlier. The ad had claimed that the film was “Approved by the Surgeon Generals of the Army and Navy, and the Public Health Department,” a fact refuted by Blue. Beneath the letter, the magazine ran a notice that it would no longer accept advertising for or review sex hygiene films.⁹⁰ In the 20 September issue of *The Moving Picture World*, a notice from Surgeon General Blue was printed: “This is to inform you that the Public Health Service has withdrawn its indorsement [*sic*] of the films, *Fit to Win*, *End of the Road* and *Open Your Eyes*, and all other pictures dealing with venereal diseases that have been shown or are to be shown commercially.”⁹¹

Although the medical community and public health bodies initially had