“Good Taste and Decency”
Female Sexuality in the Production Code Era, 1930-1955
Kinne Chapin, Honors Thesis Seminar
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I. Acknowledgements

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II. Introduction

I was very much disillusioned in my Prince Charming because he merely pecked me when he kissed me. In fact I was quite disgusted—I thought him bashful and a fool for not knowing how to kiss after seeing so many movies.¹

In the early to mid 20th century, movies instructed the American public about sexuality. Though sex might not be a polite topic of dinner table discussion, as of 1920, 50% of the population was taking a class on the norms of sex and gender every week by buying a ticket to their local cinema.² Of the films they could watch between 1920 and 1930, between 75 and 80% dealt with the titillating subjects of sex or violence.³ Thus the neighborhood movie theater became a place where one could learn the cliff’s notes of wooing your sweetheart, or how to respond to unexpected advances.

Perhaps the above quote illustrates this sentiment best. The response of a high school student to a 1933 psychological study conducted by the Payne Fund, which examined the effects of films on the minds of America’s youth, this girl’s answer demonstrates the ubiquity of Hollywood in daily life. First, she knows that in order to be intimate with her new suitor they must kiss. Next, she expresses her disdain for his technique. She has sat in wonder as the hero kissed the heroine on screen and cannot believe that the smooches have not had the same impact on her beau. Hadn’t he been paying attention on his weekly trips to the movies?

Though films may have been constructed as entertainment, their audience absorbed information as they watched stories unfold. As a result, the cinematic screen became a place where culture was molded and morality was debated—even when a lighthearted

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³ Foreman, Our Movie Made Children, 29-30.
musical number was the only subject to debate. Nowhere was the film industry’s search for a moral high ground more apparent than in the realm of female sexuality. In the cinema, women’s bodies, actions, and reputations became, quite literally, larger than life. When Twentieth Century Fox debuted CinemaScope, their new widescreen technology, in 1953, New York Times reporter Barbara Berch Jamison was unimpressed, deeming the technology “a little hard on the actors.” But the larger-than-life CinemaScope image suited actress Marilyn Monroe. When Monroe appeared onscreen, the male audience clapped and explained in a display of “unbridled male attention.” As this audience reaction demonstrates, the oversized images of the cinema could incite passion just as easily as plot could provide an education in propriety and romance.

Because millions of Americans were influenced by cinematic representations of female sexuality, it is not surprising that so many groups hoped to define, limit, and construct those representations. From the early 1900s, religious organizations, educators, and the general American public were demanding greater regulation of film content. But what would this regulation entail? What could occur on screen? What could be implied? And, most importantly, what did filmic representations of female sexuality connote to their audiences? These are just some of the questions that this thesis hopes to answer by examining how the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors Association (MPPDA) regulated films in the years between 1930-1955. Though government, the church, the industry, and the public began the debate over whether the movies should be censored almost as soon as they began to be made—Chicago was the first to enact censorship laws in

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5 Jamison, “Body and Soul.”
1907, though many cities and states soon followed—the most effective censoring of the movies was, in actuality, not censorship but self-regulation. From the years between 1930 and 1955, Hollywood studios voluntarily agreed to make their films according to the static mandates of the Motion Picture Production Code, an agreement that put decisions about film images and content in the industry's hands.

The tenets of the Production Code instructed Hollywood on how to approach everything from religion, to murder, to miscegenation in its films. Though the focus of the document may have been wide, its application was heavily slanted towards controlling portrayals of sexuality. For a period of at least twenty years, the members of the MPPDA were responsible for enforcing the Code and carrying the torch of morality through a process known as self-regulation. MPPDA officials quibbled with producers, fought over scripts, forbade studios from buying the rights to certain books or plays, and condoned or condemned the final product. Without a Production Code seal of approval, a film was doomed—until 1948 it could not even play in major theaters—so whether eager or reluctant, film studios collaborated with the Production Code's demands. Beginning with the full enforcement of the Code in 1934, sex was erased from the American screen.

What remained? Eager to keep audiences buying tickets, and convinced that sexual content was the best way to do so, producers continued to toe the line of the Code while fighting the MPPDA over what they could show on screen. Not to be outwitted, the MPPDA pushed back, suggesting that producers change everything from single lines of dialogue to

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the entire arc of a plot in order that the resulting film not be too salacious. The result of their fights with the MPPDA was often a tangled web of allusions and hints from which a sexual subplot could be inferred—though it was never explicitly stated. These pictures, what the Code referred to as “wholesome entertainment,” were what was exhibited to American audiences, and were intended to protect the morality of the nation. It was these “clean” films that educated the American public on standards of sexual propriety and gender expectations. Thus, the cinema became a site of competing discourses in the Production Code Era. Audiences were eager to visually devour the sexual narratives they saw on screen. The MPPDA wanted to raise the moral standards of the country by providing lessons on female chastity. Filmmakers, caught in the middle, hoped to entice audiences, satisfy the MPPDA, retain their artistic integrity, and ultimately keep their job.

Self-regulation and film in the first half of the 20th century is a much-discussed subject in historical scholarship. As the United States is a country that values freedom of art and expression, it is not surprising that so many historians should examine a time in American history when censorship was not only permitted, but in fact welcomed. However, though many works have examined how the Code condoned self-regulation, and a handful have even delved into the effects of the Code on portrayals of female sexuality, gaps still exist in the scholarship. The most common form of literature dealing with the Production Code is a general history. Large texts that cover the history of cinema from its inception to its present day invariably have a chapter covering the institution of the Production Code, as well as its effects. However these studies, such as Movies and American Society, edited by

Stephen J. Ross, and Richard Maltby’s *Hollywood Cinema*, invariably give a broad overview of the Code and Code Era films, rather than delving into specific case studies. Those books that do delve into the portrayal of female sexuality during the Production Code Era fall into two categories. First, some texts, such as *Screening Sex* by Linda Williams, analyze films as text, with little emphasis on the historical influence or ramifications of censorship. Williams illuminates the nature of sex on the screen during the Code era by parsing specific scenes for their sexual details, and uniting the common threads among them. But she stops short of tying these common threads to the American cultural climate of the 1930s or 1940s, and she does not consider the effects these images might have had on audiences. Lea Jacobs’ *The Wages of Sin* takes a similar approach when examining the “fallen woman film,” a genre popular in the 1930s, and how the advent of the Production Code altered the fallen woman narrative. But though Jacobs astutely identifies how films of the Code era found ways to subtly suggest sexual transgression, she stops short of examining the effects these films may have had on the audience, or what accounted for the genre’s undying popularity.

In contrast, a second wave of scholarship on sexuality in the Production Code Era focuses specifically self-regulation, without providing a detailed examination of individual films. In *The Naked Truth: Why Hollywood Doesn’t Make X-rated Movies*, Kevin S. Sandler analyzes films from the Production Code era as a subset of his larger argument that “censorial pressures are always accommodated in American cinema, especially when the

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10 Ross, *Movies and American Society*.
representations...involve sex, violence, and certain thematic issues.”

Frank Miller similarly employs examples of Production Code cinema in his work *Censored Hollywood: Sin, Sex, & Violence on Screen*. Miller explores films from the Production Code Era in order to further his exploration of whether self-regulation was itself moral or justified.

These two modes of examining sexuality in Code cinema—reading films as text and making broad arguments about the goals and methods of the MPPDA—leave little room to examine the juncture between films and self-regulation. Existing scholarship fails to look at how the static language of the Code was applied flexibly to individual films as the nation’s concerns developed from 1930 to 1955. Since the Code was both instituted and dissolved due to a tension between what the audience wanted to see and what the industry thought it should see, it is necessary to use individual films as a lens through which to view varying applications of the Code in a broader historical context.

This thesis will examine the on-screen portrayal of female sexuality in three movies filmed between 1930 and 1955. Each film represents a different version of female sexuality, and the MPPDA reacted to the depiction in each film differently. The first film to be examined is *She Done Him Wrong*, a 1933 Paramount picture starring Mae West. Censors and administrators could not stand behind the film’s bawdy depiction of female sexual agency, despite the film’s popularity with audiences. To a country still reeling from the relaxed sexual norms of the 1920s, *She Done Him Wrong* portrayed female sexuality

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15 Miller, *Censored Hollywood*. 
unacceptably. When the Code started to be strictly enforced in 1934, the MPPDA banned West’s brand of female sexual agency from American screens.16

*Gone with the Wind* a 1939 Metro-Goldwyn-Meyer blockbuster, was not subject to the same ridicule. Lauded by critics and audiences alike, few people questioned the sexual themes of *Gone with the Wind*. But the film stretched the Code’s proscribed “wholesome entertainment,” a fact not lost on the MPPDA, who challenged many of its important scenes.17 However, the film escaped with many of its salacious elements intact, perhaps due to the studio’s financial investment and the frenzy of national anticipation for the film. But no matter what the reasons behind the PCA’s leniency towards *Gone with the Wind*, the final cut demonstrated that it was possible for a sexually empowered heroine to appear onscreen even under the Code—as long as she only demonstrated sexual agency within matrimony.

In contrast to these two contentious films, 1953’s *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, starring Marilyn Monroe, is a film not often mentioned in texts on the Code era. Though the film’s plot sizzled, it raised few eyebrows; a handful of ribald remarks were no longer enough to convince censors or audiences that they were watching anything immoral. Though the audience might perceive Monroe as a sexual woman due to her breathy voice or famous curves, the film itself presents her as chaste and ultimately good. Thus *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* represents the “wholesome entertainment” that the Code long strove to create, even though it debuted after the foundation for the Code had begun to decay.

Through a thorough examination of its case studies, this thesis will examine how the unchanging tenets of the Production Code were applied flexibly to individual film projects

16 Walsh, *Sin and Censorship*, 74-76.
17 Miller, *Censored Hollywood*. 
from 1930 to 1955 and will explain the differing applications in the context of changes in American culture. By placing three case studies in the context of the evolving enforcement of the Production Code and the changing sexual mores of American society, this work hopes to prove that self-regulation was a fluid process enacted by real people that changed in reaction to the fears and desires of the captive American audience, even as the language of the Code remained the same. Furthermore, this work will explore the divergent trajectories of sex and gender under the Production Code. Though the Code's limitations on sexual activity were more loosely enforced by the end of the Code Era, the expectations for portraying femininity and female sexual agency became increasingly conservative. While the MPPDA and audiences alike felt that the Code's standards limiting displays of kissing or references to pregnancy were antiquated by the early 1950s, they were unable or unwilling to relax the portrayal of women on American screens as a chaste and pure example to educate women across the nation.
III. “Wholesome Entertainment for All the People:”\textsuperscript{18} Adopting the Motion Picture Production Code

Moving pictures are a tremendous power, but today they are a power run riot. They are as Intangible [sic] as they are powerful, and for this very reason can spread suggestions for evil as well as good, without fear of hinderance [sic].\textsuperscript{19}

This quote, from letter by Hugh Knowlton to the editor of \textit{The New York Times} published in July 1919, exemplifies public opinion about the cinema in the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century. Film was a new and unfamiliar medium of entertainment and audiences were either delighted or disturbed by the voyeuristic experience of viewing a story. As Knowlton’s letter demonstrates, even the most enthusiastic viewers felt that films had a powerful effect on the moral fiber of their audience. Demands for film censorship developed nearly alongside film’s debut; 1909 saw the creation of the National Board of Censorship, a body that screened completed films and passed judgment on their suitability for public viewing, and in 1915 the first bill lobbying for federal censorship was introduced to Congress.\textsuperscript{20} Local censorship in states and cities began as early as 1908, and developed into formal organizations with the authority to edit films as time progressed.\textsuperscript{21} Mounting calls for external censorship came to a head in 1921, when 100 bills in 17 states proposed censorship of films screened within that state.\textsuperscript{22}

Seeing that regulation of films would take place with or without their consent, film studios decided to gain control of the censorship debate. It was largely this decision to self-

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{18} Raymond Moley, \textit{The Hays Office} (Cornwall, NY: The Cornwall Press, 1945), 6.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Hugh Knowlton, “Moving Pictures that Displease,” \textit{New York Times}, July 4, 1916, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.
\item \textsuperscript{22} McClure, \textit{The Movies: An American Idiom}, 122.
\end{itemize}
regulate that prevented the development of federal censorship—while local censor boards for each state would persist, self-regulation ensured that control of the film industry remained in the industry’s hands.  

In the 1920s, a form of vertical integration called the “studio system” defined the motion picture industry. Under the studio system, five film studios comprised a monopoly on every aspect of the industry from scriptwriting, to production, to the theaters in which movies appeared. The “Big Five” as they were known, included Metro-Goldwyn Meyer, Warner Brothers, Fox, RKO (Radio-Keith-Orpheum), and Paramount. In 1922, the Big Five founded the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), an organizing body intended to give the industry a collective voice and prevent the spread of local censor boards across the country.

As their head, the MPPDA appointed former Postmaster General William H. Hays, a man whose name would soon become synonymous with film censorship; the MPPDA was often referred to as “The Hays Office.” The MPPDA selected Hays despite his lack of industry experience due to his political connections and his all-American sensibility. Journalist Edward G. Lowry said of Hays during his time as Postmaster General, “He is the one hundred per cent American we have all heard so much about...He is as indigenous as sassafras root.”  

The MPPDA thought Hays’ Christian background and “ties to the American heartland,” the result of his participation in Indiana state politics, would lend public credibility to his regulation of morality.

Almost as soon as he was appointed head of the MPPDA, Hays clarified the intentions of the organization: to cleanse the motion picture industry. Hays promised the

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public, “These pictures now being made will come out soon and they will be the proof either of our honesty of purpose or of our failure; they will be the proof either of our ability to correct our evils ourselves or of our inability to run our own business.”

In contrast to local censor boards, which viewed completed films and either banned them or excised offending portions before their public screening, Hays hoped to reform the industry through a process known as self-regulation. Film producers loathed local censors because they often cut a film to the extent that it was no longer intelligible to the audience. Pennsylvania’s film censors routinely removed any reference to pregnancy in a film, even something as innocuous as a wife making baby clothes. Because self-regulation would necessitate the cooperation of the producers as a film was created, Hays hoped the final product would honor the filmmaker’s original intentions while satisfying the public demand for morality. However, Hays’ desire to avoid local censorship after a film was produced meant that the concerns of local censorship boards would become the concerns of self-regulation. Going forward, the morality of cinema for the entire nation would be determined by the demands of its most conservative local censors.

Hays dedicated his early years in office to defeating state censorship bills, a campaign that achieved partial success because he promised self-regulation would soon monitor the industry. In 1924 Hays implemented his first formal attempt at self-regulation, “the Formula.” Rooted in the knowledge that many 1920s movies were adapted from popular literature or drama, the Formula stipulated that the MPPDA could approve or

28 Frank Miller, Censored Hollywood, 42.
29 Moley, The Hays Office, 55.
30 Moley, The Hays Office, 54-5.
deny studio requests to purchase the rights to books and plays. Hays hoped that the
Formula would allow the MPPDA to weed out any inappropriate source material.\textsuperscript{31} The
new method of regulation had a minimal effect on the popularity of adapting plays
and books into films, as studios found literary and dramatic classics a ripe genre for
“moral” source material. However, the approach did just as little to limit the production of
“immoral” films, as it did not mediate the studios’ original material. As a result, Hays began
to implement more serious measures of regulation. In 1926 he authorized the creation of
the Studio Relations Committee (SRC), an office of the MPPDA that would interact directly
with producers as they created a film. As the organization’s head, Hays appointed Colonel
Jason S. Joy, who had previously been an executive of the American Red Cross. Like many
other men who would join the campaign for self-regulation, Jason Joy was a white, middle-
class man chosen to safeguard American morality based on his political and social
connections.\textsuperscript{32}

In 1927, the SRC introduced a list of industry standards for Joy to enforce. The list,
called “The Don’ts and Be Carefuls,” was the result of a five-year MPPDA study of the
requirements local censor boards had for a finished film and was approved by Hays and the
MPPDA member companies. As the name implied, the Don’ts and Be Carefuls was a list of
offending themes in films divided into two categories—those that absolutely could not be
shown on the screen, like profanity, nudity, drug trafficking, or maligning a religious
official, and those that should be handled with the utmost care, like robbery, executions,

\textsuperscript{31} Moley, \textit{The Hays Office}, 58-9.
\textsuperscript{32} There are few explicit discussions of the background and qualifications of MPPDA members. I came to this
conclusion based on photographs and biographical information found in: Moley, \textit{The Hays Office}. 
seduction, or lustful kissing. However, despite the good intentions of The Don’ts and Be Carefuls, these restrictions were almost impossible to enforce. Though member companies had initially agreed to the rules the Don’ts and Be Carefuls set out, the lack of sanctions or other repercussions allowed them to continue making films they thought audiences would enjoy, whether or not the final product violated the rules of the SRC. Eventually, the regulations were perceived as a joke—Collier’s Magazine quipped that the Don’ts and Be Carefuls was code for “If you can’t be good, be careful.”

Having watched Hays struggle to achieve self-regulation and fail, Martin Quigley, a devout Catholic and publisher of both The Motion Picture Herald and The Motion Picture Daily, approached Hays in 1929 about developing a new industry standard that could be easily enforced. The influence of Quigley’s newspapers, as well as his constant reminders about the importance of morality in cinema, convinced Hays that a new form of regulation was necessary. In the summer of 1929, Quigley wrote what would become the Motion Picture and Production Code, in collaboration with Jesuit priest Father Daniel A. Lord. The Code incorporated all of the “Don’ts” from the 1927 regulations, and prohibited most of what had been designated “Be Careful.” Despite his deference to two Catholics in the creation of the Code, Hays, who was Protestant, insisted that the Code was not a religious document, but one of universal moral standards. Though he did not write the original Code, Hays did amend Quigley and Lord’s document. Geoffrey Shurlock, a longtime employee of Hays, believes that Hays added many of the Code’s concrete prohibitions, saying, “[they were put in by] Will Hays and his staff. They got really specific. I think Mr.

34 Miller, Censored Hollywood, 41.
Quigley would never have used some of the ridiculous language on things like watching out for the blowing up of trains under the heading of violence."\textsuperscript{37} Hays likely added these specifics due to his experience with local censor boards and his knowledge of the thematic content they tended to excise.

Despite their lack of enthusiasm for the Don’ts and Be Carefuls, the MPPDA member companies unanimously approved the Motion Picture Production Code, which was formally in effect after March 31, 1930. Part of the reason that the producers were so willing to adopt the Code was the explosion of the talkies in the late 1920s. When dialogue was introduced to films, both a film’s visual and aural content became subject to scrutiny and complaints about morality skyrocketed. Though producers still may have opposed a document regulating their creative process, and though they fought Hays about certain stipulations, they were as eager as he to stem the negative press about the immorality of film.\textsuperscript{38} Many of the producers were also anxious to avoid having their films chopped to pieces by local film censors—while they may have resented the Code’s stifling prohibitions, they would prefer to create a film that adhered to these moral standards than have their artistic creation mauled after its completion. As Geoffrey Shurlock summarized, “That’s why we have a code. Because we have censor boards...[and we need to h]ead them off at the pass.”\textsuperscript{39} Lastly, there was an economic incentive for the producers to sign the Code. In the months following the 1929 stock market crash, attendance at the movies had not waned, and the industry had begun to think itself depression-proof.\textsuperscript{40} But despite their initial buoyancy, the studios were cognizant that their luck might shift, and thus reluctant

\textsuperscript{40} Walsh, \textit{Sin and Censorship}, 70.
to risk publicly refusing to make moral films. No matter what convinced the producers to support the Code, what they had unwittingly approved was a document that would not be significantly edited until 1956, though the stringency of its enforcement would wax and wane in the intervening time.

The language of the Code itself was both vague and surprisingly specific. It was separated into three sections: an Introduction, General Principles, and Particular Applications. The Introduction provided a justification for the Code based on the responsibility of the producers to uphold the morals of their audience, a belief that would become quickly inseparable from the concept of film censorship and self-regulation. The Code stated:

...it became necessary to reaffirm the standards under which silent films had been produced since 1922, and to revise, amplify and add to those principles in the light of responsible opinion, so that all engaged in the making of sound pictures might have a commonly understandable and commonly acceptable guide in the maintenance of social and community values in pictures.\footnote{Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema*, Appendix I.}

By signing the Code, the producers agreed with public opinion that not only did cinema have a direct affect on the morality of its audience, but that it also had a duty to promote correct morality and deliver “wholesome entertainment,” as the audience could not protect itself from a film’s harmful effects.\footnote{Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema*, Appendix I.} The General Principles of the Code defined the concept of morality. By agreeing to them, the producers vowed not to make films in which “the sympathy of the audience” was drawn to “crime, wrongdoing, evil, or sin.” They furthermore promised to make films that presented “[c]orrect standards of life,” and
respected all "[l]aw, natural or human."\textsuperscript{43} But what is a correct standard of life? What constitutes crime, wrongdoing, evil, or sin? The General Principles of the Code were littered with vague terms that producers and the Hays Office would quarrel over in years to come.

However, where the General Principles were perhaps intentionally vague, the Particular Applications were ludicrously specific. This category of demands was subdivided into sections prohibiting certain depictions of Crimes Against the Law, Sex, Vulgarity, Obscenity, Profanity, Costume, Dances, Religion, National Feeling, Titles (referring to the title of a film itself), and Repellent Subjects. The reasons for some of the prohibitions, such as exposing children’s sex organs on film, were clear. However, other demands, such as insisting that surgical operations be shown “within the careful limits of good taste,” seem extraneous.\textsuperscript{44} As this brief overview demonstrates, the Particular Applications covered every element of what could be shown on film from the treatment of flags to the treatment of animals. But despite its breadth, one application received far more ink than the others: sex.

Reflecting on his time enforcing the Code, Geoffrey Shurlock noted, “The real concern in this country, the real hangup of the United States as far as film is concerned, is on sex [sic].”\textsuperscript{45} Nowhere is this fascination and repulsion more apparent than in the text of the Code itself, which describes in detail what it would never allow to be shown on screen. Under the heading of “Sex,” the Code warned producers not to show adultery in a positive light. It also noted that "scenes of passion" should not be excessive, and that they should be

\textsuperscript{43} Maltby, \textit{Hollywood Cinema}, Appendix I.
\textsuperscript{44} Maltby, \textit{Hollywood Cinema}, Appendix I.
presented in a way so as not to “stimulate the lower and baser element.” Miscegenation, scenes of childbirth, white slavery, and sexual perversion were forbidden outright. The precautions against provoking lust in the audience extended into other sections of the Code as well—any dance that suggested sex was forbidden, as was nudity either “in fact or in silhouette.” Perhaps the most important characteristic of the Code’s provision on sexuality is its insistence that sexual acts, such as adultery or sexual assault, not be presented in a humorous way or in an “attractive light.” This wording exemplifies the Code’s function to protect the audience. The MPPDA was less concerned with the repugnance of adultery itself than with the fear that an adulterous film would inspire an adulterous audience. Due to these restrictions, the cinematic world presented by the Code was one where a kiss was consummation, and on where, when sex did occur, it was a rogue act to be punished rather than a natural part of the human existence.

Initially, the public stood firmly behind the Production Code. As the plethora of local censor boards and bills for national censorship demonstrate, the majority of the public clamored for a moral film industry. The Boston Traveller eagerly approved the Code, calling its passage, “The best news we have heard in a long time.” In fact, the majority of those with lukewarm enthusiasm for the Code cited their disbelief that it would be more effective than previous self-regulation attempts, rather than finding it too stringent. Because the public supported the Code’s goal of moral films, SRC members saw themselves as fulfilling a duty to movie audiences. Though the language of the Code was protectionist, the members of the SRC believed that the desire to protect public morality came from the public itself,

46 Maltby, Hollywood Cinema, Appendix I.
47 Maltby, Hollywood Cinema, Appendix I.
48 Walsh, Sin and Censorship, 61.
49 Walsh, Sin and Censorship, 62.
rather than from within their organization. Geoffrey Shurlock explained, “I have never felt that the American public cannot take care of itself viz a viz [sic] any given movie. I have too much respect for the average human being...I am protecting the industry from being harmed by outraged viewers.”

However, very little protection of either the audience or the industry occurred in the first four years after the Motion Picture Production Code was enacted, though the SRC did its best to enforce the tenets of the Code, and producers were marginally cooperative. In 1929 there had only been 48 consultations between the producers and the SRC during the production of a film, and in 1930 that number rose to 1,271. Furthermore the number of films that the SRC screened prior to their release jumped from 323 to 564. Despite this increased supervision, the content of films changed very little. In 1931, Father Lord, a co-author of the Code, expressed his dissatisfaction with SRC head Jason Joy upon finding that 28 of the 60 films in production at the time had plots hinging on sexual transgression. Producers were partially to blame for the lack of meaningful change in films produced in the early years of the Code. Unsure of how strictly or effectively the tenets of the new Code would be enforced, producers paid close attention to what was allowed in the films released after its adoption and took note of every scandalous inclusion as justification for the Code-breaking elements of their upcoming films. Economics also affected the Code’s early success as the Great Depression began to affect the studios. In 1931, Fox sustained a loss of $3 million, while RKO and Warner lost $5.6 and $7.9 million respectively.

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54 Walsh, *Sin and Censorship*, 70.
suffered their largest deficit in 1933, when attendance fell by a third, and many theatres were forced to close before the industry regained financial stability in 1934. In the face of substantial losses, producers turned to bawdy tricks and scandalous plots in the hope that the promise of sex would lure customers back to the cinema—a tactic that would prove only mildly successful.

Flaws in the SRC and the Code itself also contributed to the lack of immediate change. Because no provision in the Code introduced a sanction against a studio that broke the Code or released a film without correcting SRC objections, the office had little leverage with which to enforce their demands. The office also suffered under ill-suited leadership. Jason Joy retired as head of the SRC in 1932, handing his title to Dr. James Wingate. Wingate had been a censor himself, and thus approached the Code as a document of censorship, rather than one of self-regulation. The Code was intended to force producers to tell their stories differently, but under Wingate they continued to make motion pictures as they saw fit and were only reprimanded retroactively—to the frustration of all involved. As Shurlock, who was initially hired as Wingate’s assistant, reflected, “Wingate was doing what he could around here, but he was not making very great headway. He couldn’t explain what needed to be done in a given script to make it acceptable to the Code.” The SRC also had a confused chain of command—neither Wingate nor Hays could decide who had the ultimate authority to regulate a film. Thus, in the years following the

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55 Sklar, *Movie Made America*, 162.
56 Moley, *The Hays Office*, 75.
adoption of the Code, many of the films released incensed the public and undermined the reputation of the SRC.

One of the films most often cited as breaking the tenets of the fledgling Code is 1933’s Baby Face. The Warner Brothers’ film follows Lily Powers, played by Barbara Stanwyck, a young woman who travels to New York City to make a name for herself. With little experience in the workplace, Lily earns herself a job at the Gotham Trust through the power of her feminine wiles. Once hired, Lily begins to sleep her way to success—though her sexual exploits are never shown on screen. Instead, each time Lily seduces a man to earn a promotion, the camera focuses on the Gotham Trust building and slowly pans upward, indicating Lily’s rise to the top. Lily’s clothes and appearance also accrued more glamour with each successive seduction, indicating to the audience that she had sold her virtue. Many audiences accused Baby Face of straying from the Code, first and foremost because the Code clearly prohibited any depiction of prostitution, but also because the film’s ending did not sufficiently punish Lily. Though never explicitly demanded in the Code, punishment was a key feature in the SRC’s restrictions on female sexuality. SRC head Jason Joy explained:

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

At the close of Baby Face, Lily is in an ambulance with her husband, who has shot himself in reaction to false criminal charges and bankruptcy. However, an attendant promises Lily that her husband could survive his wounds, and Lily herself suffers no physical harm.

60 Sandler, The Naked Truth, 23.
61 Sandler, The Naked Truth, 23.
Advocates for film morality felt that this lack of punishment left audiences with the memory of Lily's rise to power rather than her fall from grace.

The American public also became increasingly concerned with the effect that an immoral film could have on its audience. Though crusaders for morality had always suspected that films influenced their viewers, Henry James Foreman’s 1933 book *Our Movie Made Children* made this allegation directly, and thus further indicted questionable films like *Baby Face*. *Our Movie Made Children* was a “popular summary” of a series of psychological studies about the effect of films on their viewers conducted between 1929 and 1933 by the Motion Picture Research Council and the Payne Fund, a private organization founded in 1927 to protect and promote youth welfare.  

Though Forman himself did not conduct the studies, W.W. Charters, the Chairman of Educational Research for the Payne Fund, sanctioned Forman’s text and additionally vouched for the scientific accuracy of the statements set forth therein. The bulk of the conclusions reached in *Our Movie Made Children* hinge on the understanding that films affected the memory of the viewer more than other mediums—for example Forman relates that in classrooms where films replace textbooks, student comprehension jumps from twenty to forty percent. However in popular cinema, the preternatural hold of a film on its audience was not used to increase knowledge, but rather to instruct a young, often unsupervised audience in “the ubiquitous themes [of] love, sex, and crime.” Forman illuminated his argument through quotes that exemplified the derogatory effect of cinema on America’s youth, such as this statement from a sixteen-year-old girl:

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61 Forman, *Our Movie Made Children*.  
64 Forman, *Our Movie Made Children*.  
The movies have given me some ideas about the freedom we should have. For instance, in the pictures the wildest girl always tames down and gets the man she loves. Why not in real life? My notion of the freedom I should have, and I have it, is to go out and have a good time, but watch your step.67

By clearly tracing the connection between illicit films and illicit thoughts and actions, Our Movie Made Children hoped to shock readers into the belief that audiences could not protect themselves from on-screen immorality.

The alarmist text achieved its goal—Hays and the MPAA were aware of the negative publicity Our Movie Made Children brought to their organization, the Code, and the movie industry as a whole. An MPPDA report published soon after the book’s debut lamented, “So long as they go unchallenged, the ‘Payneful’ charges become accepted as the truth for propagandists for [government] censorship.”68 The MPPDA quickly commissioned Raymond Moley to write a critical response to Forman’s charges entitled Are We Movie Made?69 Unfortunately, the report was not enough to counter the negative publicity that accompanied Forman’s text. Milton Merlin of the Los Angeles Times exemplified the media reaction, writing, “As a business, as a form of entertainment, as an art, motion pictures are liable to the closest inspection, and strictest supervision, should the evidence here provided be accredited.”70 Perhaps more important than media coverage, however, was the public reaction to Forman’s text. Organizations from the General Federation of Women’s Clubs71 to Phi Delta Kappa, the national teacher’s sorority, were soon incorporating the text

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67 Forman, Our Movie Made Children, 165.
70 Milton Merlin, “Consider the Children Before the Silver Screen.” Los Angeles Times, July 16, 1933, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.
into their agenda.\textsuperscript{72} The publication of \textit{Our Movie Made Children} caused Father Lord, who had previously fully supported the Code, to formally sever ties with the Hays office. Other devout Catholics were similarly outraged that the Code was being so loosely enforced to the detriment of the nation’s children.\textsuperscript{73} Catholic bishops warned Hays that unless the Code was more strictly enforced, they would publicly condemn the MPPDA.\textsuperscript{74} In addition, the Church began to compile a blacklist of inappropriate films for their congregations to boycott, a threat that would cause a sizable drop in ticket sales for blacklisted films.\textsuperscript{75} On April 11, 1934 a group of Catholic bishops formed the Legion of Decency, an organization that would give voice to their previous threats.\textsuperscript{76}

Though the Legion of Decency threatened the Hays Office, it did not undermine its authority. The Legion campaigned for a stricter enforcement of the Code, but never endorsed any state or federal censorship law.\textsuperscript{77} The organization hoped to convince each Diocese in the United States to join and even extended invitations to non-Catholic groups interested in upholding morality in films.\textsuperscript{78} The Legion was a grassroots organization—it had no central hierarchy and did not require its members to pay dues—but it was one with a large imprint. Its mouthpiece was the Catholic press of 310 newspapers with a circulation of more than 7 million, which it enlisted to encourage individuals and households to boycott objectionable films.\textsuperscript{79} Once won over by the Legion’s purpose, these individuals themselves were expected to spread its message. The pledge members signed upon joining

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\item \textsuperscript{72} “Interesting Account of Social Happenings,” \textit{Chicago Defender}, November 24, 1934, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.
\item \textsuperscript{73} Walsh, \textit{Sin and Censorship}, 77-80.
\item \textsuperscript{74} Walsh, \textit{Sin and Censorship}, 85.
\item \textsuperscript{75} Walsh, \textit{Sin and Censorship}, 99.
\item \textsuperscript{76} Walsh, \textit{Sin and Censorship}, 101.
\item \textsuperscript{77} McClure, \textit{The Movies: An American Idiom}, 144.
\item \textsuperscript{78} McClure, \textit{The Movies: An American Idiom}, 144.
\item \textsuperscript{79} McClure, \textit{The Movies: An American Idiom}, 145.
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the Legion read, “I hereby promise to remain away from all motion pictures except those which do not offend decency and Christian morality. I promise further to secure as many members as possible for the Legion of Decency.”

The Legion managed to gain clout across religious and political lines despite the prevailing anti-Catholic sentiment of the early 20th century. Catholics were unable to gain a foothold into national politics until the nomination of their first presidential candidate in 1928, and the Protestant Klu Klux Klan rallied liberals and nativists by aligning Catholicism with fascism. The Legion likely gained traction with non-Catholics because of the salience of the film morality debate—the American public was dissatisfied with self-regulation and the Legion was the first organization to formally reprimand the SRC.

Understanding why the Legion gained clout with Hays and the SRC is more clear-cut. In the depths of the film industry’s recession, the possibility that the nation’s Catholics would boycott films was too great a risk of revenue and bad publicity for the MPPDA. Furthermore, Hays recognized that the Legion was merely asking the MPPDA and the SRC to follow through on its promises. He said of their requests, “The films had to be decent. The yardstick was nothing new—just the Code that we had had for four years. All they asked was that the industry live up to it.” Understanding the threats that lay ahead and the rationale behind the Legion’s requests, Hays began to pursue a compromise.

Hay's first measure to ensure the Code’s stricter enforcement was promoting Joseph Breen in December 1933, in response to the publication of Forman’s text and increasing

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accusations that the Code was being poorly enforced. Hays eased Wingate out of the SRC, by first asking him to call his assistant Breen in to help read troublesome scripts, since Breen had shown a knack for negotiating Code violations. In the last days of 1933, Breen took over Wingate’s job completely, and quickly demonstrated his talent for enforcing the Code. Breen’s iron fist soon made him a household name— Film Weekly called Breen the “Hitler of Hollywood,” and Vanity Fair coined the term “Joebreening,” meaning to heavily edit a film. But though Breen had a reputation of systematically upholding morals, those who worked closely with him did not perceive him as a missionary. Geoffrey Shurlock remembers Breen simply as doing his job, saying:

He wanted to save the industry, and in doing so, he would say he would be protecting the morals of minors. But I don’t think he came in here with a banner on a white horse. He was a practical newspaper man.

No matter what motivated Breen, his success was undeniable. With Breen at the helm of the SRC, Hays’ chances of successfully enforcing the Code skyrocketed.

In June of 1934, Quigley and Breen attended a meeting of the Legion of Decency in Cincinnati in hopes of putting a stop to its negative campaign. On behalf of Hays, Quigley and Breen offered the Legion a compromise. They promised to rigorously enforce the Code by establishing a new office to replace the SRC, the Production Code Administration (PCA), with Breen as its head. Going forward, every film produced by a member studio would need to receive a physical seal of approval from the PCA in order to be distributed. Furthermore, because Big Five owned movie theaters across the country contracted to show their films

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84 Walsh, Sin and Censorship, 88.
86 Walsh, Sin and Censorship, 106.
87 Miller, Censored Hollywood, 89.
exclusively, it would become virtually impossible to screen a film without a PCA seal in an American movie theater. Lastly, Quigley and Breen promised to implement a sanction of $25,000 on any film that violated the Code.\textsuperscript{90} The Legion agreed to the compromise, under the condition that they could continue operations to ensure the MPPDA stayed true to its word.\textsuperscript{91} This agreement and the subsequent creation of the PCA ushered in a new age of truly “wholesome” entertainment. Though the morality of individual films might be questioned after 1934, the attitude of producers, the MPPDA, and the public had shifted—clean films were now the rule rather than the exception.

The Production Code Administration ensured the morality of upcoming films through a more rigorous evaluation during their production. First, the studio sent a script of their proposed film to the PCA office, where two employees read it to ensure it avoided individual bias. The employees then issued a report stating whether the script was acceptable or problematic, along with the rationale for their conclusion. If the script only contained minor Code violations, one of the employees would write a letter to the film’s producer indicating what needed to be changed. For an ordinary script, the producer need only accept this letter and make the requisite changes. For any script that presented serious challenges to the Code, the PCA would call the film’s producer in to discuss the issues at length and suggest alternate ways of accomplishing their goals in the script. Lastly, the PCA screened each film after its completion, to ensure that the necessary changes had been made before finally granting a seal.\textsuperscript{92}

\textsuperscript{90} Walsh, \textit{Sin and Censorship}, 104.
\textsuperscript{91} Walsh, \textit{Sin and Censorship}, 104.
Thus self-regulation under the PCA sought to develop a moral plot, rather than excise portions immoral portions of a film’s narrative. Because this process was a collaboration as the film was being written and developed, the PCA encouraged writers to create an organically moral product rather than attempt to self-censor before submitting the script.93 No matter how many back and forth arguments the PCA and the producers had along the way, the PCA only refused seals in a few extreme circumstances. The office initially existed to protect the motion picture industry from bad press and financial harm, and thus was hardly interested in withholding seals from completed films. As Shurlock put it, "We were in the business of granting seals. The whole purpose of our existence was to arrange pictures so that we could give seals."94 Such was their mission, even if they occasionally had to ask producers to cut scenes or re-shoot sequences after a film was finished in order to distribute a completely moral picture.

The new PCA system changed the narrative arc of a film—in a clean film, sex was removed entirely from the screen, but not necessarily from the plot. Thus the audience learned to read a complex web of signals to understand what transpired between a film’s hero and heroine. These changes could be as simple as using euphemisms to describe a woman’s purity or more complex shifts in imagery, such as showing a woman alone on the streets to indicate that she was a prostitute.95 The little that could be shown onscreen was therefore imbued with more importance. Because the culmination of any cinematic relationship was a kiss, the structure and sequence of a kiss became, as Linda Williams

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95 Jacobs, The Wages of Sin, 36.
aptly argues, a “synecdoche of the whole sex act.” The dialogue, music, and setting that framed the kiss became as important as the kiss itself, and, once initiated, the kiss was often interrupted to avoid Code sanctions on lengthy displays of passion. Perhaps most importantly, the PCA’s application of the Code created a gendered formula for the ending of a film. Women who behaved themselves sexually were rewarded with a male companion at the end of the film, while those who transgressed were either punished by the film’s ending or domesticated and stripped of their dangerous ways. The PCA did not invent these endings or the moral lessons that they conveyed. Instead, they created an environment in which heroines had to stay sexy without offering sex, and in which punishment and reward were the only possible solutions to a woman’s sexuality. By closely controlling women’s sexuality on screen, the PCA and the Code hoped to protect the virtue of women across the nation.

The PCA’s desire to protect the morals of the nation evolved between 1930, when the Code was first adopted, and 1955, the final year before its revision. Though the language of the Code was static throughout these years, the needs and concerns of the nation changed over time, and thus the approach of the PCA to safeguarding American morality changed also. While the PCA felt threatened by 1932’s She Done Him Wrong, which featured a protagonist in control of her sexuality, it condoned 1939’s Gone with the Wind, a film that tiptoed along the line of sexual impropriety by broaching taboo topics such as marital rape. By the close of the Production Code Era, films, such as 1953’s Gentlemen Prefer Blondes, employed heroines who were sexually intriguing to audiences without ever

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96 Linda Williams, Screening Sex (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 38.
97 Williams, Screening Sex, 38.
98 Jacobs, The Wages of Sin, 41.
engaging in sex. Furthermore, while the PCA’s limits for what sexual acts could be shown on screen expanded over time, it continually narrowed the version of female sexuality that could be presented on screen. While films in such as *The Moon is Blue* began to discuss sex and seduction more explicitly in the 1950s, they did not allow female characters sexual agency, in contrast with the pre-Code films of the early 20th century. In their attempt to safeguard the morality of American women, the PCA increasingly stifled their sexuality.

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IV. “Come Up and See Me Sometime:” Mae West and Sexual Transgression

Despite the lofty rhetoric with which it was passed, the Motion Picture Production Code did not have an immediate effect on the movie industry in 1930. Only in 1934, after the Studio Relations Committee became the Production Code Administration, an organization complete with sanctions for those who violated the Code and the zealous Joseph Breen as its head, did the Code ensure the production of wholesome films. As a result, the years from 1930 to 1934 were emblematic of a struggle within the film industry. While the SRC attempted to deliver clean movies to the public, studios reeling from heavy depression losses—which reached their nadir in 1933—hoped to use sex and scandal in order to increase audience attendance.

In this nebulous era of mixed industry messages, the SRC was unable to stop the release of films, such as the previously discussed Baby Face, that clearly violated the stipulations of the Code. No star better embodied the widespread violations of the Code’s sexual mores than bawdy film legend Mae West. Mae West’s sexual persona of female empowerment grew out of the traditions of vaudeville and slumming that were popular, if scandalous, in the 1920s. Only the early inefficiencies and lack of authority of a fledgling SRC allowed this personality onto the cinematic screen in 1933’s She Done Him Wrong, a film that found tremendous popularity and seeped into the American cultural lexicon while simultaneously eliciting tremendous controversy and cultural backlash. By ultimately condemning the film, the SRC categorized West herself as immoral, making her a scapegoat for the dangers of unbridled sexuality.

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100 She Done Him Wrong, directed by Lowell Sherman (1933; Paramount Studios), Netflix.
Mae West broke into show business as a stock character in actor Hal Clarendon’s touring company in the early 1900s. She briefly appeared on Broadway in the 1911 production *A La Broadway*, but she left just a year later to start a vaudeville act. West’s vaudeville persona was constantly evolving, and it was not until she took her act to Chicago that she began to develop the style of performance that she made famous in her later plays and films. When visiting the famous African American club, Elite No.1, West was inspired by the sensual shimmy of the female dancers and decided to incorporate the dance into her act, a choice emblematic of West’s ripening stage personality. Though the shimmy was traditionally a female dance, in the nightclub it required a partner. Performing the dance on stage, West made the audience her partner, thus implicating them in her illicit sexual behavior. After adopting this African American style, West’s performances became overtly sexual and far from subtle, with a dash of danger and intrigue.

Incorporating elements of African American dance into her vaudeville act may have made West exotic, but it did not make her unique. West was simply expanding on the 1920s phenomenon of slumming, in which middle class whites patronized African American clubs for the sake of a thrill and the chance to take part in the club’s perceived permissive sexual standards. Slumming became widespread in the 1920s after the Great Migration caused a spike in the African American populations of northern cities and these urban centers became hotbeds for jazz and the blues. Though the white middle class did not encourage slumming, by the late 1920s the trend was tolerated and even on its way to becoming

102 Watts, *Mae West: An Icon*, 32.
103 Watts, *Mae West: An Icon*, 49
passé. On visits to Chicago clubs like Elite No. 1 or Harlem spots such as the Cotton Club, white women were allowed to toss aside the purity mandated by polite society and engage in sexual acts both on and off the dance floor, with both white and black companions, that would have shocked their fathers. Because the thrill of slumming relied on a fear of, or distaste for, the African American club, white visitors to Harlem and other popular spots for slumming across the country reified the black “other” even as they interacted with African Americans more closely than ever before.105

By appropriating the shimmy, West joined a long line of entertainers who mimicked what they saw in African American clubs and called their imitation innovation.106 Even in the 19th century, white performers were capitalizing on African American modes of entertainment through blackface minstrelsy, which, as Eric Lott notes, “was organized around the quite explicit ‘borrowing’ of black cultural materials for white dissemination.”107 As West developed her stage persona into what Americans would later see on film, she began to closely resemble a set of 1920s African American performers who also challenged sexual expectations on stage—the blues woman. Blues women of the 1920s, such as Ida Cox (who would later be coined “The Sepia Mae West”),108 Mamie Smith, and Alberta Hunter, used their musical talent as a way to escape domestic work and migrate to Northern cities. In their lyrics and performances, blues women challenged heterosexual standards by taking ownership of their own desire, whether that desire was directed towards men or women. This moment of musical freedom came at a time when

106 Heap, Slumming, 214.
108 Watts, Mae West: An Icon, 161.
single African American women in urban centers were tightly controlled. Organizations like the Phyllis Wheatley Association lodging houses monitored African American women to prevent them from being contaminated by the city's inherent sin. By challenging their sexual repression on stage, blues women also challenged their physical oppression in urban centers and became a symbol of defiance. By making the blues woman her muse, Mae West expanded their protest to voice the sexual oppression of all women. But with her roots in blues and the shimmy, her act would echo its African American origins even as her audience broadened.

At 40, West was a mature woman when American audiences first saw her on screen. Yet she was already familiar with show business scandal. In 1926 West starred in a play of her own creation, entitled simply Sex. The show premiered at the off-Broadway Daly Theater on April 26, after a brief test run in Connecticut theaters. Sex received mixed reviews from critics, but news of the scandalous plot—which examined themes from prostitution to drug use—brought New Yorkers to each performance. Pressure from the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice caused the New York Police to investigate the play, and on February 9, 1927, West was arrested while preparing for a performance. West was released and obtained an injunction to prevent further investigation of Sex, but was eventually tried after the passage of the Wales Padlock Bill, which deemed “indecent productions” illegal. The actress, along with the cast and crew, went to trial on March 28,

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110 Watts, *Mae West: An Icon*, 73
111 Watts, *Mae West: An Icon*, 73-5
112 Watts, *Mae West: An Icon*, 89
113 Watts, *Mae West: An Icon*, 90
1927, was convicted on April 5, and sentenced to 10 days in jail on April 19.\textsuperscript{114} Rather than fearing that a stint in jail would end her career, West believed it would cement her fame, telling reporters from the \textit{New York Herald Tribune}, “I expect it will be the making of me.”\textsuperscript{115} Jail time categorized West's pure sensuality as a danger to the public, but the public didn't seem to mind. Her subsequent plays, \textit{Pleasure Man} and \textit{Diamond Lil}, did not stray far from the formula set out in \textit{Sex}, and her appeal did not wane with each production.\textsuperscript{116}

In 1930, Universal Studios tried to capitalize on West's notoriety by buying the film rights to her play \textit{Diamond Lil}. The SRC denied their request using the Formula, a system first implemented by Hays in 1924 that prohibited studios from purchasing the rights to inappropriate books or plays.\textsuperscript{117} As the rest of West's plays explored similar subject matter, it seemed the star was fated to remain on the stages of New York. However, an economic crisis caused Paramount Studios to circumvent the ban in 1932.\textsuperscript{118} With a deficit of 21 million dollars, Paramount was desperate to produce a lucrative film. The studio believed that \textit{Diamond Lil} and West's notoriety constituted their best chance to produce a hit. When Paramount signed West, Hays reminded studio head Adolph Zukor that though he had purchased the rights to West's work, he could not make a filmic adaptation of \textit{Diamond Lil}. Even as Zukor reassured Hays, he began producing an adaptation under the name \textit{Ruby Red}, hoping that Hays would not notice the new project's resemblance to \textit{Diamond Lil} until it was too late.\textsuperscript{119} Sure enough, by the time Wingate noted the similarities, Paramount was two weeks into production.

\textsuperscript{114} Watts, \textit{Mae West: An Icon}, 92
\textsuperscript{115} Watts, \textit{Mae West: An Icon}, 92
\textsuperscript{116} Watts, \textit{Mae West: An Icon}, 102-3.
\textsuperscript{117} Miller, \textit{Censored Hollywood}, 71.
\textsuperscript{118} Miller, \textit{Censored Hollywood}, 72.
\textsuperscript{119} Watts, \textit{Mae West: An Icon}, 149-51
Much of the confusion over Paramount’s surreptitious production of a *Diamond Lil* adaptation stemmed from a communication failure between MPPDA head Will Hays and SRC head James Wingate. In October and November of 1932 Hays and Wingate exchanged dozens of letters both with Zukor and each other, but none of the parties involved seemed to have a clear idea of his role in the self-regulation process. In a telegram sent November 10, Wingate informed Hays that the script for *Ruby Red* closely mirrored the story of *Diamond Lil*, but deferred to Hays’ authority, saying, “it’s basic dramatic structure may in our opinion with proper treatment become acceptable under the code...Has this matter been cleared with your office under the formula and shall we proceed with it as a code matter[?]” As this telegram indicates, Hays and Wingate had not clearly defined their roles in self-regulation. Though Wingate controlled the SRC, he appears uncertain of his job requirements. Wingate’s confusion continued as the film’s production progressed– on November 11 he asked Hays to scold Zukor for proceeding with the production, and on November 21 he informed Hays that Paramount got the film approved under the formula, a theory which Hays refutes a mere day later.

Insufficient delegation between Hays and Wingate bred confusion and thus negated the purpose of the SRC office. Paramount had a final script and threatened to begin shooting *Ruby Red* five days before the rights to create the film were finally granted on November 28. The advanced stage of the project and pressure from Paramount likely forced Will Hays’s hand when the MPPDA board finally issued its decision and Paramount

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120 James Wingate to Will Hays, November 10, 1932, in *Hollywood and the Production Code: Selected Files from the Motion Picture Association of America Production Code Administration Collection* (Los Angeles: Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Primary Source Microfilm).
121 James Wingate to Will Hays, November 11, 1932, in *Hollywood and the Production Code*.
123 Internal MPPDA Memo, November 28, 1932, in *Hollywood and the Production Code*. 
was able to make Mae West a star. However, in order to comply with SRC demands for the film, Paramount agreed to change the name of the production to *She Done Him Wrong*, and the name of the protagonist to Lou, as well as tamp down the sexuality of the original script.\footnote{Miller, *Censored Hollywood*, 72.}

 Paramount released *She Done Him Wrong* in February of 1933. The film is set in New York’s Bowery of the 1890s and follows the exploits of Lady Lou, a singer and performer in a saloon owned by Gus Jordan. Lou is the object of every man in the film’s desire—and they’re willing to pay for her happiness in diamonds. Though Lou gladly accepts diamonds and attention from Gus, she does not know that he uses the saloon as a mere front for illegal activities such as an implied prostitution ring. Working with the foreign couple Sergei and Rita, Gus recruits innocent women into his prostitution ring without arousing the suspicion of his customers. Captain Cummings, a federal agent played by Cary Grant, works undercover as the head of the City Mission next to the saloon to monitor Gus’ illegal activity. Lady Lou is attracted to the moral Cummings—her former boyfriend, Chick, is in prison for stealing some of Lou’s diamonds. A friend warns Lou that Chick suspects she has been unfaithful, so she pays him a visit in prison to convince him otherwise. Though Lou has not been absolutely true to Chick, he threatens to kill her if she betrays him, and thus she insists on her virtue. But Chick is not the only man under Lou’s spell. Gus’ criminal accomplice Sergei also falls for Lou and gives her his wife Rita’s diamond pin. In a highly dramatic turn, Chick escapes from prison a few days later, driven by his love for Lou. However, before police can search the saloon, Chick sees Lou in her
room with Cummings, and begins to strangle her, stopping only because he still loves her. Startled, Lou promises she will leave with him at the end of the night.

Once Lou is alone again, Rita confronts her about Sergei’s gifted diamond pin. The two fight, and in the midst of their exchange Lou accidentally stabs Rita. Knowing that the police will soon search her room for Chick, Lou disguises the body and asks her trusted bodyguard, Spider, to dispose of it and send Chick back up to her room. After Spider departs, Lou begins her last performance number on the saloon’s stage, during which she motions for another suitor, Dan Flynn, to wait for her upstairs. Lou knows that Chick is armed, and that he will shoot Dan for presuming to enter his beloved’s room. As she predicts, Chick shoots Dan, drawing police to her room. In the police raid, Cummings reveals himself to be a federal agent, and arrests Gus, Sergei, and Chick for their many transgressions. Instead of sending Lou to jail with the other criminals, Cummings leads her away from the saloon in his own carriage. He tells her that she does not belong in jail and reveals his alternative punishment—matrimony—when he gives her an engagement ring.¹²⁵

As this quick plot summary reveals, She Done Him Wrong pushed the boundaries of highlighting sexual exploits on film. Furthermore, it introduced a movie star who transgressed all the rules of polite society. By expressing her desire for sex, her disinterest in monogamy, and her willingness to capitalize on feminine wiles for material gain, West defied 1930s definitions of femininity. She also defied the expectations for contemporary actresses, such as Greta Garbo, Norma Shearer, Clara Bow, and Jean Harlow, each of whom

¹²⁵ She Done Him Wrong.
presented a far subtler on screen persona.\textsuperscript{126} As their frantic attempt to derail production indicates, the SRC was well aware that \textit{She Done Him Wrong} contained scandalous material. During production, the Committee demanded edits and corrections to make the final product suitably decent. Most of the suggested edits were specific, such as Wingate’s request that the producers remove West’s reference to herself as “The finest woman that ever walked the streets,” a clear reference to the fact that she had been a prostitute before working in Gus’ saloon.\textsuperscript{127} They also hoped to remove West’s famous suggestion to Grant: “Come up some time and see me. I’m home every evening,” a line which indicated her hope of a sexual affair.\textsuperscript{128} In both instances, the SRC was unable to force Paramount or the film’s producers to change the script.

Instead, \textit{She Done Him Wrong} is laden with overt violations of the Code. In the most innocuous example, West entertains multiple men (though not sexually) in her bedroom, a room that is supposed to be handled delicately under the Code.\textsuperscript{129} More seriously, the film’s plot hinges on an implied reference to white slavery, a topic that the Code strictly prohibits.\textsuperscript{130} During production, The SRC required Paramount to remove all evidence of prostitution in the film, due to the Code’s strict prohibition on showing white slavery.\textsuperscript{131} However, Wingate was not satisfied with the studio’s edits to the script. Upon reading the film’s final script, Wingate wrote to Hays, “…we are not sure that the suggestion of white slavery has been eradicated as entirely as might be desirable.”\textsuperscript{132} Though Lady Lou asks Gus if he’s been sending the girls to the coast “to become classy dips and burglars” rather

\textsuperscript{126} Watts, \textit{Mae West: An Icon in Black and White}, 161.
\textsuperscript{127} Miller, \textit{Censored Hollywood}, 73.
\textsuperscript{128} Miller, \textit{Censored Hollywood}, 73.
\textsuperscript{129} Maltby, \textit{Hollywood Cinema}, Appendix I.
\textsuperscript{130} Maltby, \textit{Hollywood Cinema}, Appendix I.
\textsuperscript{131} James Wingate to Will Hays, December 2, 1932, in \textit{Hollywood and the Production Code}.
\textsuperscript{132} James Wingate to Will Hays, January 11, 1933, in \textit{Hollywood and the Production Code}. 
than prostitutes, the crime ring’s exclusive trade in women would have indicated its true purpose to viewers.\(^{133}\)

The film’s most explicit violations of the Code hark back to West’s days in vaudeville. Lady Lou’s brazen nightclub numbers and her costumes seem to violate the Code’s restrictions on dances that “represent sexual actions or indecent passions.”\(^{134}\) Lou’s song “A Guy What Takes His Time”\(^{135}\) best exemplifies this transgression. For this performance, wearing a bejeweled dress with a plunging neckline, West tells her audience “I’m a fast movin’ gal that likes them slow/ I got no use for fancy drivin’/ Want to see a guy arrivin’ in low.”\(^{136}\) Though her dance during this song is a mere sway, West’s indication that she is a sexually “fast” woman who likes a man to spend his time seducing her is one of the film’s most explicit sexual references. Audiences complained about this song soon after the film’s release, and Wingate was able to respond by cutting a portion of the song, but not until after some prints of the film had already been distributed.\(^{137}\) Because there were not yet repercussions for studios that violated the Code, the SRC was powerless to impose its suggestions for the film. In later years, outside agitation would help reinforce the Code’s authority, and thus avoid such blatant violations, but the most effective group to pressure the film industry, the Legion of Decency, would not organize until months after the release of *She Done Him Wrong*.

Even if the SRC had the power to alter the script for *She Done Him Wrong*, the final product could have scandalized a nation—two key elements of West’s screen persona were

133 *She Done Him Wrong.*
135 As part of her unique dialect, West substituted the word “what” for “that” in the lyrics.
136 *She Done Him Wrong.*
137 James Wingate to Will Hays, February 27, 1933 in *Hollywood and the Production Code.*
undetectable in print. The first aspect of West’s performance that would have been missing from the script was double entendre, a technique that was necessitated by, and even thrived under, censorship. In *She Done Him Wrong*, West was a champion of innuendo and wrote her own one-liners, though she worked with professional scriptwriters John Bright and Harry Thew.¹³⁸ West explained her sexual jokes by saying:

> I didn’t start putting in all these wisecracks till I started pictures. When I wrote *She Done Him Wrong* ... the studios and the censors wouldn’t let me do certain things ... and so with everybody weakening my drama, I figured I had to put some other element in.”¹³⁹

Though SRC and censor examinations of her films may not have been the only reason for West to use double entendre, her quote illuminates an important aspect of post-Code cinema. Because speaking explicitly about sex was prohibited by the Code, writers quickly learned to allude to sex through complex verbal signals, scene settings, vocal intonation, and visual cues.¹⁴⁰ With West, it was not the words she said that offended, but rather how she said them. For example, when Lady Lou’s maid mentioned that she wouldn’t want a policeman to catch her without her petticoats on, Lou shoots back, “No policemen? How about a fireman?”¹⁴¹ Her husky drawl insinuates what the words do not explicitly say—that the maid might want to have a sexual fling with a fireman. Similarly, when Cummings inquires if Lou has ever met a man who could make her happy, Lou replies coyly, “Sure, lots of times.”¹⁴² West’s intonation links the happiness Cummings mentions to multiple sexual affairs.

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¹³⁹ Leider, *Becoming Mae West*, 251.
¹⁴¹ *She Done Him Wrong*.
¹⁴² *She Done Him Wrong*. 
The SRC would be equally unlikely to predict the sensuality of West’s movements from reading a script. After incorporating the shimmy into her vaudeville performance, West maximized on the sensual possibilities of her movements. On screen even West’s walk was erotically employed, transformed to a slow, sensual, saunter. The Baltimore *Sun* described West’s walk as, “a strut. It was an undulation. It was done with a short stride and let the hips fly where they may.”\(^{143}\) The *Sun*’s characterization mimics white descriptions of African American dances in the 1920s,\(^{144}\) indicating that audiences perceived West’s slumming and borrowing. All of West’s movements on screen were imbued with as much eroticism, allowing Lady Lou’s harmless physical interactions with men to stand in for more serious sexual acts. When Lou first meets Sergei, he kisses her hand passionately and Lou swoons. When a maid interrupts to inform Lou that her bath is ready, she shoots back, “You take it; I’m indisposed.”\(^{145}\) Because Lou openly relishes having her hand kissed, and is unwilling to break away for a more pressing engagement, the kiss is transformed from an innocent gesture into a sensual act. West’s movements become not just an erotic experience for the men on screen, but additionally for the male audience. Film scholar Laura Mulvey argues that the purpose of the female figure in cinema is to be devoured by the audience’s male gaze, which allows viewers to be voyeuristic participants in what they see on screen.\(^{146}\) Thus the screen turns every actress into a sexual object, but perhaps never more than when she is aware of her erotic

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\(^{143}\) John Moffitt, “Going Up to See Mae West II: Her Road to Success Was Paved With Bad Intentions,” *Sun* (Baltimore, MD), July 1, 1934, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

\(^{144}\) Hunter, *To Joy my Freedom*, 175.

\(^{145}\) *She Done Him Wrong*.

\(^{146}\) Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (Fall 1975): 11, JSTOR.
effect, as West was, and is eager to control its impact on the audience (See Appendix, Fig. 1).

Audiences noticed West’s unique interpretation of sexuality—the film made a splash on screens across America. As with West’s earlier projects, a portion of the public and the media was outraged with the final product. The Chicago Tribune called the film “a low-brow comedy drama...It is as high minded as the shifty eyed youth who chalks foul words on sign boards and as subtle as a barnyard romance.” The same article suggested that the film be marked “For Hicks Only,” and said it represented a failure of Hays and the SRC.¹⁴⁷ Unfortunately for the SRC, the media also noticed the film’s resemblance to Diamond Lil. Of the transformation from play to film, Variety wrote, “nothing much has changed except the title. But don’t tell that to Will Hays.”¹⁴⁸ Some detractors did tell Hays, however. Father Lord, co-author of the Code and eventual founder of the Legion of Decency, told Hays that the Code had been written to prevent films like She Done Him Wrong.¹⁴⁹ Even studio executives, like Sydney Kent of Fox, complained to Hays that the film was overly sensual—though Kent may have been envious of Paramount’s ability to bend the rules.¹⁵⁰

Former SRC member Geoffrey Shurlock remembers a similar outrage among the American public. As he recalls, audiences accused the film of breaking the Code, and disliked West in general. As Shurlock said, “She rubbed them the wrong way.”¹⁵¹ West rubbed local censor boards the wrong way too; Pennsylvania, Kansas, and Virginia all

¹⁴⁷ “She Done Him Wrong,” Chicago Daily Tribune, February 1, 1933, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.
¹⁴⁸ Watts, Mae West: An Idol, 156.
¹⁴⁹ Walsh, Sin and Censorship, 76.
¹⁵⁰ Watts, Mae West: An Icon, 172.
excised some of West’s more scandalous lines.\textsuperscript{152} In an article that listed \textit{She Done Him Wrong} as a film that proved the ineffectuality of the SRC, \textit{The Los Angeles Times} lambasted its on-screen use of double entendre, saying, “Expert trickery is often indulged to put over a certain effect on the screen and the employment of such chicanery leads to far worse salaciousness than absolute frankness.”\textsuperscript{153} Though they may not have wanted West to state her sexual intentions frankly, many audience members and critics were outraged by her “far worse” alternative.

Despite the bad press, however, reactions to \textit{She Done Him Wrong} were not universally negative. In a series of \textit{New York Times} editorials that attempted to determine who had ruined the movies, both a Broadway producer\textsuperscript{154} and a film exhibitioner mentioned \textit{She Done Him Wrong} as an example of cinematic success. As the exhibitor explained, he did not want to keep unique films out of his theaters, but rather “[He] welcomes sex in the luscious form of Mae West...”\textsuperscript{155} As this reaction shows, not all industry members were as offended by West’s performance as Fox’s Sydney Kent. More importantly, much of the public emerged from \textit{She Done Him Wrong} more titillated than scandalized. The film broke box office records for two weeks after its February 9\textsuperscript{th} Manhattan premiere,\textsuperscript{156} and more than 7,000 cinemas across the country renewed the film. Los Angeles’ Uptown Theater renewed it seven times, which the \textit{Washington Post}

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\textsuperscript{152} Leider, \textit{Becoming Mae West}, 259.
\textsuperscript{153} Edwin Schallert, "Hays Ethics Code Evaded by Trickery: Sentiment Is That Movies Should Do Own Cleaning Up," \textit{Los Angeles Times}, March 5, 1933, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.
\textsuperscript{155} Arthur L Mayer, "Who Killed the Movies?" \textit{New York Times}, March 11, 1934, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.
\textsuperscript{156} Watts, \textit{Mae West: An Icon}, 155.
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remarked was “believed to set a record for all time.” By the summer of 1933 the film had grossed more than $2 million, with profits still trickling in from showings across the country. But it wasn’t just the scandalous content that caused the ticket sales—the film was well crafted, and earned an Oscar nomination for Best Picture in 1934.

In the wake of She Done Him Wrong’s immense popularity, West’s sultry performance was absorbed into the popular culture. The film spawned several innocent parodies and riffs, such as a Betty Boop special called “She Wronged Him Right.” Similarly innocent was the short film Polly Tix in Washington, starring Shirley Temple, in which America’s little sweetheart uses her feminine wiles to corrupt a morally upright child senator. A scantily dressed Temple kisses the senator and promises to be his if he signs a certain bill. Upon hearing the senator’s refusal, Temple echoes Mae West’s most famous line from She Done Him Wrong—“You can be had.” Temple even employs double entendre in the film. After Temple persuades the senator, his daughter confronts Temple and asks her to leave her father alone, saying, “You’re not a good woman.” Temple points to her jewels and replies saucily, “You’ve got to be good to get stuff like this in these hard times,” implying that it is not her moral fiber but her seduction tactics that are “good.” The young age of Shirley Temple and her co-stars in Polly Tix in Washington may have allowed the public to laugh at the way Mae West’s overt brand of sexuality had taken hold of American culture.

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157 “Mae West Picture Returned 7 Times,” Washington Post, August 13, 1933, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.
158 Watts, Mae West: An Icon, 169
159 Leider, Becoming Mae West, 261.
160 Polly Tix in Washington, directed by Charles Lamont (Educational Pictures, 1933).
161 Polly Tix in Washington.
However, not all of West’s devotees were as young and innocent as Shirley Temple. Though critics had initially assumed that West’s bawdy persona would offend female viewers, *She Done Him Wrong* gained her a bevy of female devotees.\(^\text{162}\) In fact, many women saw West as a hero for the gender. One editorial in *The Sun* cheered West for “[popularizing] the art of being a woman, and [making] women realize that a woman ain’t no sin.”\(^\text{163}\) As this article indicates, fans perceived West’s femininity first and sexuality second. Women began to envy her ample cleavage and imitate her late 19\(^{\text{th}}\) century style, both of which were at odds with the 1920s flapper aesthetic—to many, West’s appearance represented a reprieve from dieting.\(^\text{164}\) West’s appeal was so widespread that according to one article in the *Los Angeles Times, She Done Him Wrong* had turned America’s young women into little Maes, ready to walk and talk as she did.\(^\text{165}\)

When explaining her female following, West argued that it was intellect, and not sex, that women noticed in her films. With West on screen, American women got the chance to see a woman outsmart and outmaneuver men—and they liked it. West concluded:

> The only censorship directed at me comes from men, because intelligent men resent my satire…I show that the big-shot guys with a lot of dough and tailcoats and culture will fall like shooting-gallery ducks for a lady lion tamer or any Mme. Honky Tonk that gets the range on them.\(^\text{166}\)

As with most of West’s dramatic mantras, the truth was not quite that simple.

While West had female fans, and many of the formal complaints against her came from the male-dominated SRC, not all women were ready to endorse her scandalous behavior.

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\(^{162}\) Watts, *Mae West: An Icon*, 164.

\(^{163}\) Dorothy Dix, "Dorothy Dix Says: Hail Mae West," *Sun*, March 5, 1934, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.


\(^{165}\) Alma Whittaker, "I’d Make the Ideal Mother," *Los Angeles Times*, April 1, 1934, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.

\(^{166}\) John Moffitt, "Going up to See Mae West," *Sun*, June 24, 1934, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.
A women’s film committee in Philadelphia “condemned” *She Done Him Wrong*, and many more felt that West’s onscreen persona “[ran] counter to the schoolbook maxims on success and virtue.” In other words, many women feared that West gave girls the wrong impression about how to behave in society and the acceptable methods of achieving one’s goals. This fear was rooted in the discoveries of the Payne Fund, circulated through Henry James Forman’s *Our Movie Made Children*, which found that immoral films such as *She Done Him Wrong* had an adverse effect on young viewers. Forman’s tome even explicitly stated that watching an immoral movie could lead young girls to make bad decisions—the Payne Fund found that 25% of girls surveyed “[acknowledged] engaging in sexual relations after becoming aroused at a movie.”

*The Motion Picture Herald’s* interview with actress Mary Pickford exemplifies how West roused these fears in the public conscience. Though Pickford had elsewhere admitted to enjoying West’s films, in the *Herald* she recalled being horrified to find her niece singing a song from *She Done Him Wrong*—the title of which she was too embarrassed to relate to the reporter. Though Pickford believed it was acceptable to enjoy West’s films, she could not stand to think that by singing a Mae West song, her niece might be preparing for a more serious imitation. MPPDA employee Ray Norr stated his fears more clearly: “The very man who will guffaw at Mae West’s performance as a reminder of the ribald days of his past will resent her effect on the young, when his daughter imitates the Mae West wiggle before her boyfriends.”

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167 Moffit, “Going up to See Mae West.”
168 Forman, *Our Movie Made Children*.
would contaminate a generation of young women led to her continued censorship, despite her immense popularity.

A fascinating side effect of the backlash against Mae West’s uninhibited sexuality in her films was the media’s attempt to establish her as a pure and moral woman off screen. Just at the film *She Done Him Wrong* had to conclude with Lady Lou morally purified through matrimony, so too did the media wish to purify West by portraying as a traditional homemaker (See Appendix, Fig. 2). At times the media teasingly introduced the contrast, as when John Moffit of *The Sun* wrote, “In her private life she has never had a scandal. In her public life she has never had any moral responsibility whatsoever.” But many more articles focused solely on West’s personal life, as if to argue that private morality should nullify immorality on screen. This attempt to sanitize West’s reputation was the result both of public backlash and the mounting pressure to purify the film industry. In a 1934 article entitled “Will Mae West Survive Movie Uplift Effort?,” reporter Philip Kingsley for the *Chicago Daily Tribune* wrote, “She is uninterested in Hollywood parties. She does not drink. She lights a candle in a little church every morning.” Kingsley even went so far as to report that West answered all her fan mail from adoring young women by telling them to behave and listen to their mothers. By revealing West’s threatening personality to be a mere façade, Kingsley hoped to allow West to continue her harmless bravado on film. However, by denying her moral deviance, Kingsley also stripped West and *She Done Him Wrong* of their subversive power.

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172 Moffitt, “Going up to See Mae West II.”
173 Philip Kingsley, ”Will Mae West Survive the Movie Uplift Effort?” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 14, 1934, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.
Perhaps the most interesting article debating Mae West's morality was written by Alma Whittaker for the *Los Angeles Times*. Entitled “I’d Make an Ideal Mother,” the article spun an interview West into a speculation on her ability to raise a child. The author begins with the idea of West’s being a mother as a preposterous idea due to her promiscuous onscreen behavior. West, however, insisted she would be an excellent mother, reasoning, “I’d be broad-minded, tolerant, and still a good influence in my children's lives.” West also indicated that she would keep some of her cinematic past from her children, so that they would not be inclined to behave as she had. Though Whittaker conceded that older children would love to have Mae West as their mother, she ultimately asked her readers to consider: “will the future of the race be safe in the hands of the Mae Wests of the world?”

For Whittaker and all those examining the American family, the mother was the lynchpin of a family’s morality. If familial problems arose, they were often blamed on the mother’s inability to keep harmony. In contrast, if a family appeared successful, happy, and healthy, the mother was commended for her steady moral hand. These definitions of the competent mother had particular significance in the 1930s, when the family was thought to be in crisis as it crashed against the hardship of the Great Depression. Experts concerned that the male position as head of household had weakened during the nation’s economic crisis praised supportive and passive mothers who stayed within the home. West’s brash onscreen persona was at odds with the

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174 Whittaker, “I’d Make an Ideal Mother.”
176 Feldstein, *Motherhood in Black and White, 12*.
177 Feldstein, *Motherhood in Black and White, 24*. 

portrait of motherhood expected by the decade’s theorists and thus debating her maternal competence was the ultimate test of her morality. By ultimately deeming West unfit to raise a child, Whittaker deems her incongruent with American values. Furthermore, the author implies that if West cannot nurture her own child, she is unfit to be an example for the public. The question becomes not what will become of West’s children, but “will the future of the race be safe.” By implicating both her cinematic and private morality, Whittaker judges West an inadequate and unacceptable public figure.

The public’s underlying moral discomfort with Mae West may account for the heavy regulation of her later films. When Joseph Breen became Hays’ second in command and the Studio Relations Committee became the Production Code Administration (PCA) with the means to enforce the Code, Breen recalled the seal that the SRC had previously granted to She Done Him Wrong.178 Without a seal from the PCA, She Done Him Wrong could no longer be exhibited in theaters. In a letter to Hays explaining his retraction, Breen condemned the film as a whole, claiming, “It would be a tragedy if [this picture was] permitted to be exhibited at the present time.”179 Though West’s subsequent films may have remained more scandalous than the competition, later works such as Belle of the Nineties were watered down as compared to She Done Him Wrong. Given the increasingly decent trajectory of her films, West was forced to admit in later years that She Done Him Wrong was “a bit daring” and that she would not

attempt to make it again.\textsuperscript{180} As West’s films lost sizzle, the media encouraged rumors that her popularity was “slipping.”\textsuperscript{181}

Some historians, such as Lea Jacobs, have recently argued the PCA did not edit and regulate West’s films more than those of her colleagues.\textsuperscript{182} Similarly, PCA member Geoffrey Shurlock dismissed accusations that the Legion of Decency and the PCA “picked on Mae West any more than anyone else.”\textsuperscript{183} But more important than the PCA’s actual regulation of West’s films was the public’s perception of their stringency. In an article about West’s third film, \textit{It Ain’t No Sin}, the \textit{Chicago Daily Tribune} proclaimed, “No star has ever been censored as she has been, day after day, week after week, during this production.”\textsuperscript{184} Even other actors and actresses felt that West was receiving the brunt of the PCA’s attention, though some of them felt her films deserved the extra editing.

Screen siren Marlene Dietrich famously accused Mae West of being responsible for the wellspring of morality that came with the PCA in 1934. Dietrich said of West, “I like Mae, but it is all her fault that we have the Hays Office and this childish censorship. So American—to see sex everywhere and then try to hide it.”\textsuperscript{185} Hollywood and the public felt that Mae West’s films were dangerous and being handled with care, even if the PCA treated them with standard procedure.

By rejecting \textit{She Done Him Wrong}, the SRC categorized the film as immoral, and implicated Mae West herself the film’s immorality. The SRC and sectors of the American

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{180} Edwin Schallert, "Mae West Champions Screen Censorship Drive," \textit{Los Angeles Times}, September 23, 1934, ProQuest Historical Newspapers. \\
\textsuperscript{181} Rosalind Schaffer, "West Refutes Rumor She’s ‘Slipping,’” \textit{Chicago Daily Tribune}, May 13, 1934, ProQuest Historical Newspapers. \\
\textsuperscript{182} Jacobs, \textit{The Wages of Sin}. \\
\textsuperscript{183} Shurlock, \textit{New York Times Oral History}, 121. \\
\textsuperscript{184} Kingsley, "Will Mae West Survive the Movie Uplift Effort?" \\
\textsuperscript{185} Watts, \textit{Mae West: An Icon}, 175.}
public found West’s challenge to gender and sexual norms threatening, primarily because they feared legions of young female fans would follow her example. The SRC did its best to limit this perceived threat through regulating West’s later films. As the media, the public, and the SRC separated Mae West from the rest of Hollywood, West became not an actress but an entity to be debated and discussed; she became a cinematic “other.” Given these attempts to separate West and discredit her appeal, perhaps it is not surprising that even today there are rumors that West had African American ancestry.\textsuperscript{186}

Similarly, the greatest outcry against \textit{She Done Him Wrong} was directed against West’s nightclub numbers like “A Guy What Takes His Time,” a part of the film in which West directly channels the African American blues woman. Local censor boards tended to cut the songs, and, as Mary Pickford’s embarrassment indicates, the general public didn’t like them either.\textsuperscript{187} Like the blues women West channeled in her vaudeville act and eventually on screen, the American public found West’s brazen sexuality to be thrilling, but ultimately unsafe. As with the decrease in popularity of slumming in the late 1920s, once West’s brand of sexuality was not new, it was simply distasteful. By scrubbing West’s later films clean of daring innuendos and salacious plot material, the SRC branded West’s behavior not only unacceptable for the screen, but as unacceptable for women across America.

\textsuperscript{186} Watts, \textit{Mae West: An Icon}, 3.
\textsuperscript{187} Leider, \textit{Becoming Mae West}, 259.
V. “I Shan’t Be Lonely:”\textsuperscript{188} Condoned Sexuality in \textit{Gone With the Wind}

In 1934, the Studio Relations Committee became the Production Code Administration, complete with the ability to sanction studios that did not comply with the Code or with its zealous leader Joseph Breen. No longer could Mae West’s brand of bawdy sexuality grace American cinemas. In fact, Breen recalled the seal for \textit{She Done Him Wrong} soon after accepting his position as the head of the PCA, quite literally banning her dangerous sexuality from the screen.\textsuperscript{189} For 20 years following this stricter enforcement of the Code, Breen and the PCA reviewed 98 percent of American films. From 1934 to 1948, a PCA seal had to mark every reel of film distributed to theaters across the country, making the word of Breen and the PCA law for producers, scriptwriters, and studios.\textsuperscript{190} Though Breen was intense in his approach to self-regulation, and demanded high standards from both his employees and the studios, he was not on a mission to wipe films clean of all human interest. His motto was “Make them reasonably acceptable to reasonable people.”\textsuperscript{191} Most of all, he wanted to make sure that films followed the letter of the Code.

In order to ensure compliance from producers, Breen assigned two men from the PCA to every film made in Hollywood. Two men were needed to ensure that suggested edits to a project did not reflect an individual PCA member’s bias. These men read drafts of the film’s script, proposed changes, read revisions, and—if necessary—visited the film set in order to make sure that moral standards were upheld. If a script was particularly problematic, or if the two men disagreed about how to address an ethical issue in the

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\textsuperscript{188} \textit{Gone with the Wind}, directed by Victor Fleming, produced by David Selznick (Warner Brothers, 1939).
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\textsuperscript{189} Tropiano, \textit{Obscene, Indecent, Immoral, and Offensive: 100+ Years of Censored, Banned, and Controversial Films}, 193.
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\textsuperscript{190} Miller, \textit{Censored Hollywood: Sex, Sin, & Violence on Screen}, 80.
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\textsuperscript{191} Sandler, \textit{The Naked Truth: Why Hollywood Doesn’t Make X-Rated Movies}, 22.
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script, a larger group would debate possible resolutions. As a result of PCA surveillance, Hollywood began to make films that reflected the Code’s stringent moral standards—films like 1938’s *You Can’t Take It with You*, the plot of which focuses on the necessity of gaining a family’s approval before marrying one’s desired partner.\(^ {192}\)

Under the PCA’s vigilant gaze, some individuals—like Mae West—floundered and failed. Others, like David Selznick, managed to thrive. Selznick produced a series of box-office hits in the early years of the PCA, including *A Tale of Two Cities* and *David Copperfield* in 1935. As these films indicate, Selznick made it his mission to bring great literature to the American screen—a mission that may explain his success under the PCA; established classics were perceived as less objectionable.\(^ {193}\) In 1936 he started his own production company, Selznick International Pictures, and began looking for the next great novel that would make a similarly great film. In the same year, Margaret Mitchell published *Gone With the Wind*, winning the Pulitzer Prize and gaining millions of fans across the country. America’s enthusiastic response to Mitchell’s novel was almost unprecedented—one review of the novel claimed that if stacked end to end, the copies of *Gone with the Wind* sold would measure fifty times the height of the Empire State Building.\(^ {194}\)

Though the novel may not have been a literary classic, Selznick saw it as the perfect material for his next film. He bought the rights from the book’s publisher, Macmillan, for $50,000, which at the time was the highest sum ever paid for the rights to a first novel.\(^ {195}\) The ensuing film pushed the limits of the PCA and the Code itself to show audiences a

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\(^ {192}\) *You Can’t Take It with You*, directed by Frank Capra (Columbia Pictures, 1938).  
\(^ {193}\) Molly Haskell, *Frankly, My Dear* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 51.  
\(^ {194}\) Haskell, *Frankly, My Dear*, 23.  
\(^ {195}\) “Selznick Won’t Cut Film,” *New York Times*, December 15, 1939, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.
heroine aware of, and in control of, her sexuality, demonstrating that the increased collaboration between studios and the PCA after 1934 did not indicate complete cooperation. Though the PCA ultimately condoned the film, Scarlett’s independent sexuality still threatened some, like the Legion of Decency, who felt her example validated questionable moral behavior. Because Scarlett pushed the bounds of sexuality within the confines of marriage, she embodied the tense expectations for women of the 1930s, and presented them with a form of rebellion ultimately marked acceptable by a PCA seal.

Like the record price for the novel’s film rights, each facet of *Gone with the Wind*’s production was large-scale. The film cost nearly four million dollars to create and was the longest film to ever grace American screens at just under four hours. Scarlett, the film’s heroine, would have more costume changes than any other character in the history of American cinema.196 Even the tickets for *Gone with the Wind* cost more than traditional cinema tickets, as the length of the film limited the number of times a cinema could screen it each day. Selznick’s plan for the release of the film was equally unique. The producer intended to release the film in only six cities over the 1939 Christmas season, rather than simultaneously release 300 prints of the film to show around the country, as was typical at the time.197 Producers hoped that lowering the number of initial viewers of the film through this limited release would raise the premiere’s prestige and make seeing the film a special event. Most importantly, *Gone with the Wind* was expected to draw in record-breaking audiences. Ten months before the film’s release, a survey conducted by the

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American Institute of Public Opinion revealed that 56.5 million Americans planned to see the film, a figure they estimated as half of the country's regular movie-goers.\textsuperscript{198}

The popularity of Margaret Mitchell's novel, combined with rumors of the scale of \textit{Gone with the Wind}'s production, led to an unparalleled level of excitement for the film's release among the media and the American public. The novel's readers clamored for information about Selznick's epic search for an actress to play Scarlett, a quest that took two years, $92,000, and 1,400 candidates to complete.\textsuperscript{199} The media and the public were not shy about sharing their opinions of who could best fill the role of the novel's beloved heroine. When Selznick eventually chose the young British actress Vivien Leigh, fans doubted that a foreigner could capture the essence of the Southern belle.\textsuperscript{200} H.J. Phillips of \textit{The Washington Post} remarked that the casting was akin to having "Scarlett O'Hara [turn] out to be a former lady in waiting to Queen Victoria, dismissed for calling the King 'honey,'" and remarked, "Davie Selznick turns out to be the one person in America who hasn't read 'Gone with the Wind.'"\textsuperscript{201} Nevertheless, the public managed to overcome the disappointment and regain excitement. A poll conducted in February of 1939 showed that 35\% of respondents were "satisfied" with Leigh as Scarlett, while only 1\% objected.\textsuperscript{202}

Literary accuracy was another challenge for Selznick and his team. With so many avid fans, \textit{Gone with the Wind}'s script needed to adhere to the text—all 1005 pages of it.\textsuperscript{203} Sydney Howard, the script's author, worked closely with Selznick to ensure parity between the film and the text. Though the entire plot would be too long to recount, \textit{Gone with the

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\textsuperscript{199} Haskell, \textit{Frankly, My Dear}, 69.
\textsuperscript{200} "Surveying Scarlett O'Hara."
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Wind was a Southern romance set against the drama of a country torn apart by the Civil War. The story opens in the antebellum period and introduces the young Scarlett O’Hara, a sharp-witted beauty who receives plenty of male attention—except from the object of her affection, Ashley Wilkes. Scarlett discovers Ashley is engaged to marry his cousin, the mild-mannered Melanie Hamilton. At a barbeque at Twelve Oaks, the Wilkes plantation, Scarlett speaks to Ashley in private and confesses her love for him. Ashley admits that he, too, loves Scarlett but that he believes he and Melanie will have a better marriage. When Ashley leaves Scarlett, she finds that Rhett Butler, a scandalous man who has been admiring her all evening, has heard the entire conversation, though he laughingly promises to keep her secret. After this interaction, Scarlett hastens away from Rhett only to find the party disrupted by an announcement that war has broken out. When Melanie’s younger brother Charles asks Scarlett to marry him, she agrees, despite the fact that she does not love him.

These opening scenes set the stage for an epic love triangle between Scarlett, Rhett, and Ashley that unfolds through the ravages of war and the poverty of Reconstruction. Scarlett’s efforts to win the love of the meek, retreating Ashley persist despite his marriage to Melanie, who becomes Scarlett’s closest friend when their husbands are away at war. Ashley never gives in to Scarlett’s demands that they start a life together, but he constantly affirms his love and affection for her. In contrast, Scarlett and Rhett share a moral compass at odds with societal norms and a love for wit and fun, but Scarlett can never allow herself to realize that she loves Rhett until she has pushed him out of her life (See Appendix, Fig. 3). Throughout this love story, Scarlett proves herself to be a strong-minded, determined
woman who will put food on her family’s table and save Tara, the O’Hara family plantation, by any means necessary.\textsuperscript{204}

While anticipation for the film built throughout the country, Selznick and his assistant Val Lewton began the work of getting their film approved by the PCA. The two men kept up a constant dialogue with Breen, as well as with Geoffrey Shurlock and Islin Auster, the two Administration men assigned to the film. From September 1937, when Auster read an initial draft of the script, until December 1939 when the film was released, these five men exchanged dozens of letters and phone calls concerning hundreds of changes to the film’s dialogue, plot, and costuming.\textsuperscript{205} Over their two years of discourse, each side demonstrated a concern for the opinion of the other, elucidating the collaboration between and increased accountability of producers and regulators that flourished after 1934. When, after an initial read of the script, the PCA requested that Selznick and Lewton remove the term “nigger” from their characters’ dialogue, the two took out the offensive word.\textsuperscript{206} The PCA also phrased many of their comments as general suggestions, for example saying, in reference to the murder scene, in which Melanie undresses, “We recommend, again, that you exercise the greatest care in this scene in order that there be no undue exposure of the persons of the girls,” rather than attempting to correct the scene themselves.\textsuperscript{207}

The cooperation between Selznick International Pictures and the PCA was especially apparent in an April 1939 letter written from Lewton to Breen. In the letter, Lewton

\textsuperscript{204} Gone with the Wind.
\textsuperscript{205} Hollywood and the Production Code: Selected Files from the Motion Picture Association of America Production Code Administration Collection (Los Angeles: Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Primary Source Microfilm).
\textsuperscript{206} Islin Auster to Joseph Breen, September 29, 1937, in Hollywood and the Production Code.
\textsuperscript{207} Joseph Breen to David Selznick, October 14, 1937, in Hollywood and the Production Code.
requested that Breen telephone with his comments to script changes, as many scenes would soon be shot and cannot wait for written confirmation. Lewton apologized, saying, “I know this is a great imposition and one that we continually impose upon you. Believe me that it is only because of necessity, and that we are grateful for your close cooperation.”

Though Lewton may have been praising Breen and the PCA in order to assist his request for prompt responses to script changes, his assessment of the necessity of close cooperation between the two groups was apt. Without reaching consensus on the script and final picture, Breen and Selznick could not release a film that millions of Americans were clamoring to see.

Yet while Selznick and Lewton acknowledged the necessity of cooperation with the PCA, they were unwilling to submit to all of the Administration’s demands. The producers worked more closely with the PCA than any had previously, but they also defied many of the Administration’s requests, three of which warrant further discussion here. First, the PCA objected to a scene between Rhett and Scarlett after the birth of their daughter Bonnie. Irritated with her husband, dreaming of Ashley, and reminiscing about her beauty before motherhood, Scarlett tells Rhett that she is ending the sexual component of their union. Breen expressed his concerns about this scene repeatedly, mentioning them in at least two letters to Selznick. Breen’s objections to the scene were not with its thematic content, but rather with the language the script utilized to express that content. In repeated letters to Selznick, Breen requested that the producer alter his language so that it not refer explicitly to a denial of sex. In a 1937 version of the script, Breen objected to the line, “Lock your door, by all means. I shan’t break it down,” which would allow the audience to infer that

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208 Val Lewton to Joseph Breen, April 26, 1939, in *Hollywood and the Production Code.*
Rhett accepts Scarlett’s plan. Breen had objections to the dialogue for this scene as late as January of 1939. In a letter to Selznick, he asked that the line, “You realize, of course, I could divorce you for refusing me my rights” be removed, perhaps because it intimated too strongly that Scarlett was withholding sex from her husband. Because Breen focused his suggestions on dialogue, it seems he cared little about whether Gone with the Wind contained a scene in which a wife denied her husband sex. Instead he cared that the conversation between Rhett and Scarlett appear innocent, so that its meaning could only be inferred by audience members with knowledge of marital relations.

However, despite Breen’s best efforts, Scarlett’s intentions in the final picture are quite clear. As the scene commences, Scarlett informs her husband, “Rhett…I’ve decided...well, I hope I don’t have any more children.” While the “I hope” in Scarlett’s line does not necessarily indicate an end of marital sex, the inclusion of the broken statement “I’ve decided” indicates that Scarlett no longer wants to have a physical relationship with Rhett. While Breen’s objectionable lines do not appear in the final script in their entirety, Rhett does ask, “Do you know I can divorce you for this?” The other dialogue to which Breen objected becomes a more sexually aggressive line in the finished film. After Scarlett threatens to lock her door, Rhett sneers, “Why bother? If I wanted to come in no lock could keep me out.” Furthermore, Rhett implies that he does not need Scarlett to have sex. Rhett tells his wife, “The world is full of many things and many people, and I shan’t be lonely. I’ll find comfort elsewhere.” Though the word “sex” is never uttered, and the couple does not discuss sleeping arrangements, it is difficult to imagine a viewer who could escape

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211 Gone with the Wind.
subtext of this scene. Including rhetoric about adultery and marital intimacy did not explicitly break the Code, but it did circumvent Breen’s requests.

Breen also strongly objected to the script’s depiction of Scarlett and Ashley’s relationship. When the PCA first surveyed a draft of *Gone with the Wind*, Auster said in a letter to Breen, “With regard to the scenes in which Scarlett offers to run away with Ashley... we are inclined to think that the general flavor of the story, and the way she is left at the end, provide the necessary moral values to cover these.”

At least initially, Auster felt Scarlett’s lust for Ashley, a married man, was balanced by the heroine’s loneliness and isolation at the film’s close. Auster’s comment was rooted in the PCA mindset that, while not specifically stipulated in the Code, heaping consequences on an immoral character could achieve the Code mandate that “the sympathy of the audience should never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil, or sin.”

But though the PCA accepted the plot of affection between Scarlett and Ashley, they found problems with how their affection was expressed to the audience. In a letter dated February 17, 1939, Breen warned Selznick:

> ...care should be taken with the showing of any physical contact between Scarlett and Ashley, to avoid objection. Care should also be taken with the playing of these scenes, to avoid the suggestion of attempting to glorify or justify the act and love of a woman who tries to break up a marriage.

Though Breen did not cite any particular lines or stage directions as breaking the Code, he worried that the audience would sympathize with or even idolize Scarlett’s behavior.

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212 Islin Auster to Joseph Breen, September 29, 1939,
214 Joseph Breen to David Selznick, February 17, 1939, in *Hollywood and the Production Code*. 
towards Ashley. Breen hoped Selznick could show that harboring love for a married man is harmful and dangerous.

Because Breen did not cite many specific concerns in his warning to Selznick about Ashley and Scarlett, it is difficult to know how much of their relationship in the final film would have irked him and the PCA. However it is important to note that the forbidden relationship remains a principal theme in the film, and that Selznick does not shy away from including physical contact between the two. The very scene that Auster initially mentioned remains problematic. The scene unfolds soon after the war ends and Ashley returns to Melanie and Scarlett at Tara. Scarlett finds out that the Yankees have raised the taxes on Tara to three hundred dollars, when she has only ten dollars to her name. She runs in desperation to Ashley and proposes that they escape to Mexico to start a new life, insisting passionately that it is she that Ashley loves, not his wife. Ashley declines her request, but leaves the viewer in doubt as to where his affections lie, saying that even if he loved her, “Do you think I’d go off and leave Melanie and the baby, break Melanie’s heart?” Scarlett begins to cry, and Ashley embraces her. As he holds her tightly their eyes meet, and they share a passionate kiss, after which he admits his love for Scarlett, but says that he cannot leave Melanie. At the close of the scene, Scarlett vows that she won’t discuss her feelings again, but her passion for Ashley colors the remainder of the film nonetheless.\footnote{\textit{Gone with the Wind}.} While Ashley’s refusal of Scarlett may have tempered audiences’ desire to imitate her, the scene does demonstrate that pressuring a married man to leave his wife can result in a fleeting admission of affection (See Appendix, Fig. 4).
The last of Breen’s concerns was the strongest and constituted the bulk of discussion between Breen and Selznick about *Gone with the Wind*. Towards the close of the film, after Scarlett returns from a party at the home of Melanie and Ashley, a drunken Rhett rapes her because he is upset that she cannot stop thinking of Ashley. When Auster first read the script, he advocated removing the scene entirely, saying to Breen, “The plot purpose, namely, to show Scarlett’s change of feeling toward Rhett, could as readily be achieved by a different scene between them—one which shows the tender side of his character he has kept hidden from her.” In the PCA’s first formal letter to Selznick, Breen stated his opinion more authoritatively, telling the producer, “There ought to be at no time any suggestion of rape,” although he did admit that the film could show Rhett carrying Scarlett up the stairs. Selznick, Lewton, Breen, and Auster met to discuss the contentious scene on January 30, 1939 and concluded, “This scene will be handled carefully, and will fade out at the head of the stairs. Scarlett’s struggles will not be emphasized.” But despite this apparent resolution, Breen’s disapproval of the scene continued. In a letter dated May 23, 1939, Breen told Selznick that he could not approve the scene without seeing it:

> You will, of course, have in mind that this is a very delicate scene and its acceptability will depend, pretty much, on how it comes through on the screen. The idea is to keep away from too pointedly suggesting that Rhett is about to rape his wife.

Rhett’s intentions were not the only issue that troubled Breen. He also complained that Scarlett looked too satisfied in the scene that took place the morning after the rape:

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216 Auster to Breen, September 29, 1937.
217 Breen to Selznick, October 14, 1939.
All the business of Scarlett 'stretching luxuriously'; the patting of her hair, her gay mood, etc., all emphasize this marital experience, and should, we think, be toned down to an absolute minimum...We strongly advise that you make your point and get away from it.\footnote{Joseph Breen to David Selznick, May 29, 1939, in \textit{Hollywood and the Production Code.}}

In Breen’s opinion, Selznick needed to stress Scarlett’s passivity in order for the scene to retain its morality. If Scarlett neither struggled against nor enjoyed the experience with her husband, then the off-screen rape became less problematic (See Appendix, Fig. 5).

While the final scene honors many of Breen’s suggestions, it is still shocking in the context of 1939 cinema. First, a drunken Rhett berates Scarlett about Ashley and repeatedly shoves her into a chair. Standing behind Scarlett, Rhett tells her, “Look at my hands, my dear. I could tear you to pieces with them, and I’d do it if it would take Ashley out of your mind forever.” Rhett attempts to squeeze Ashley out of Scarlett’s head by pressing his hands in on either side while she endures, silent and terrified. Scarlett does voice protest to Rhett’s advances, but Rhett catches her as she walks away and presses her against the doorframe, continuing his tirade. Scarlett struggles against him, and pulls away, but Rhett runs after her and kisses her as Scarlett pounds her fists against him. He then carries her up the stairs, saying, “This is one night you’re not turning me out,” as the scene fades. Though Scarlett’s satisfaction the next morning is brief, she does sigh happily and stretch her hands, looking contented. While the screen does fade to black as Rhett carries Scarlett up the stairs, and Scarlett’s struggles are minimal, Selznick’s original intention is preserved. He encapsulates the fire of both Scarlett and Rhett and the hatred they harbor that leads to a moment of aggression. Selznick also preserves the image of Scarlett as a sexual woman; it is clear in the final picture that she enjoyed her night with Rhett, however violent it was (See Appendix, Figure 5).
Thus in the version of *Gone with the Wind* that graced screens across America, Selznick created a heroine who lusted for, denied, persuaded with, and found pleasure in sex. Scarlett O'Hara was a woman in charge of her sexuality. Perhaps it was this characteristic of the film that concerned Breen most of all. Breen summarized his distaste for the moral flavor of *Gone with the Wind* in a letter to Selznick after receiving a revised version of the film’s script:

> The unacceptability of the present script, is suggested by the large number of important details, which not only cannot be approved, but which, in our judgment, are offensive, per se, and, likewise, enormously dangerous from the standpoint of political censorship, both in this country and abroad...Please have in mind that portion of the Production Code, which deals with 'the sacred intimacies of private life – either before marriage...or after marriage'. [sic]\(^{221}\)

As this excerpt indicates, Breen opposed elements of *Gone with the Wind* on three grounds. First, he found its content personally offensive. Second, he thought that political censors, or the local censor boards of each state, were bound to cut Selznick’s film to shreds and leave it unrecognizable to audiences. Lastly, he felt that some elements of the script, especially those about the love triangle among Rhett, Scarlett, and Ashley, violated Code regulations about marriage. Though Breen’s objections were separate, they coalesced around one concern: the treatment of sexuality and the presence of a sexually independent or sexually deviant heroine.\(^{222}\)

The PCA focused on the sexual content of *Gone with the Wind* to the detriment of other aspects of the script that warranted regulation, most notably the film’s

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\(^{221}\) Joseph Breen to David Selznick, January 24, 1939, *Hollywood and the Production Code*.

\(^{222}\) Of course, Breen did raise objections to the film that did not concern Scarlett’s sexuality. Some of these objections still related to gender—Breen spilled a lot of ink reminding Selznick not to make his portrayal of Melanie’s labor too gruesome. Others related to other sections of the Code, such as its provisions on profanity. Breen famously refused to let the film’s final line be “Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn.” Selznick had to appeal to have this decision overruled, and the meeting to decide the line’s fate lasted two hours (*Hollywood and the Production Code*).
representation of African Americans. Though the Code did not specifically prohibit a
detrimental portrayal of minorities, it did have a provision stating, “The history,
institutions, prominent people and citizenry of other nations shall be represented fairly,”
indicating the delicacy of ethnic and racial differences. Though the PCA made a handful
of suggestions about the treatment of race in the film, such as the aforementioned removal
of racial slurs, their concerns about sex far outweighed concerns about the portrayal of
African American characters. However, the PCA’s lack of sensitivity towards the
presentation of docile slavery and broken English in Gone with the Wind is unsurprising.
The white male members of the PCA were editing a film based on a Civil War novel written
in the 1920s by a Southerner longing for the racial power dynamic of the past, and they
were making their edits in a late 1930s society that was still deeply racist.

Outside organizations did attempt to persuade the Administration to alter the film’s
racial content. On May 12, 1939, representatives from Washington, D.C. based
organizations the Movie Study Community, the You Street Neighborhood Council, and the
Washington Council of Social Agencies and Neighborhood Councils wrote to Will Hays,
saying:

    The story fails to show repentance for selling human beings as cattle, nor
for poor food, clothing, and shelter given them during their many years of
slavery. You will be doing this country a great service if you refrain from
magnifying the worst actions and minimizing the best of faithfulness and
devotion and self-sacrifice rendered by this unfortunate group.

The letter cited a scene in which an African American attacks Scarlett as one that would
surely incense white audiences. The organizations did not write without cause—previous
film screenings had provoked racial violence. In 1910, the first world champion African

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223 Maltby, Hollywood Cinema, Appendix I.
American boxer, Jack Johnson, defeated the "Great White Hope" and former world champion James J. Jeffries. Film screenings of the fight incited racial violence across the country and ultimately resulted in more than 20 deaths.\textsuperscript{225} The violence was so intense that it prompted a 1912 law banning the interstate transportation of fight film reels, an act that hoped to limit violent reactions to fight results.\textsuperscript{226} Informed by this incident and many others, the authors of the above letter were justified in their fear that the scenes of racial violence in \textit{Gone with the Wind} would spark a racial rebuttal after the film's release.

However, the fact that the authors of this letter wrote to the head of the MPPDA months before the film's release demonstrates their faith in Hays and the PCA. Though the authors critiqued the film industry's racism, they believed in its ability to self-regulate. There is no indication in the MPPDA files that Hays responded to this request. Even less evidence indicates that the PCA listened to requests to alter the portrayal of African Americans exists in the final film, which adheres strictly to the archetypes of "Mammies" and "Toms" that had been used to subordinate African Americans through white entertainment for decades.\textsuperscript{227} In fact, upon the film's release, reviewer William R. Weaver of \textit{The Motion Picture Herald} raved that the film was a "bigger and better" version of \textit{Birth of a Nation}, D.W. Griffith's 1915 ode to racial intolerance. Weaver acknowledged that \textit{Gone with the Wind} "[was] not the same story" as \textit{Birth of a Nation}, but said that it was "told in much the same tone of voice and with the same smashing effect."\textsuperscript{228} Weaver was likely referring to the films' shared sense of nostalgia for a South that no longer existed, but his

\textsuperscript{227} Donald Bogle, \textit{Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Film} (New York: Continuum, 1989).
\textsuperscript{228} William R. Weaver, "Showmen's Reviews: Gone with the Wind," December 16, 1939, \textit{Hollywood and the Production Code}. 
comment also indicates that both films relegated African Americans to a secondary position in society.

Due to the large amount of “immoral” material that slipped through the hands of the PCA and into the final picture, many film historians conclude that Selznick was able to keep more sexual content in his film than any other producer during the Production Code Era.229 It is impossible to know why Breen and the PCA gave the final version of Gone with the Wind a seal and allowed it to premiere, given the type of sexual content it contained. One possibility is that Breen acknowledged the many concessions that Selznick had made in his script and was reluctant to force him to change the story in its entirety, especially since the film was based on an immensely popular novel. A far more likely explanation is that with an entire nation awaiting the film’s release, the economic consequences to denying the film a seal were too great. Geoffrey Shurlock, one of the PCA members who worked on Gone with the Wind, described the PCA as an organization that gave seals, rather than denied them. As Shurlock explained, the PCA strove to collaborate with studios and ultimately issue a seal, even if that meant compromising on a film’s content.230 With an entire country awaiting Gone with the Wind’s release, Breen had to issue a seal. But despite his qualms during the production, Breen insisted he was not discontented with the final cut of the film. Instead, he told Selznick that he would travel across the country to protest any additional excisions by local censor boards.231

As if to validate Breen’s statement, states such as Kansas, Massachusetts, and New York approved Gone with the Wind without making any corrections to the final cut, despite

229 Haskell, Frankly, My Dear and Walsh, Sin and Censorship are two examples of scholars who think Selznick “got away with” more than other producers.
231 Walsh, Sin and Censorship, 150.
the film’s unprecedented sexual content. Whatever cuts were made by local censor boards tended to be minor, like Chicago’s deletion of two scenes in order to “[e]liminate two close views of breasts.” After censor boards approved the film, only audience opinion remained in the debate over Gone with the Wind’s sexual content. The public did not anticipate that the film would offend—Atlanta, the site of the film’s December 1939 premiere, closed its schools to ensure that children could attend the opening, indicating the city expected the film to be wholesome entertainment for its youth. While early reviews noted the film’s passion, they did not decry the film as immoral. Mae Tinee of the Chicago Daily Tribune lauded the film, saying, “[Scarlett] completely dominates the picture, and the sex battle between her and Rhett Butler dominates your interest.” The New York Times film critic also praised Gone with the Wind, especially Leigh’s performance in the contentious scenes of Melanie’s labor, saying that her performance in those scenes alone should earn the actress an Oscar nomination. Even members of the film industry endorsed the final cut, though jealousy that more sexual intrigue was allowed in one picture than another was rampant in Hollywood under the Code. As William R. Weaver remarked in the Motion Picture Herald’s review of the film:

> It is well for showmen to know, also...that, although passion pounds steadily throughout the picture, only the hero’s suggested but unseen intimacy with the generous madame and a plantation hand’s seduction of a girl not shown until he’s corrected that matter matrimoni ally will be difficult to defend against possible moral protest. Mr. Gable’s eloquent ‘damn’ is so completely in character as to seem indispensible.

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234 Mae Tinee, “It’s True! ‘Gone with the Wind’ Has Everything, Chicago Daily Tribune, January 26, 1940, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.  
236 Weaver, “Showmen’s Reviews: Gone with the Wind.”
As Weaver opines, there are only a few points on which fellow filmmakers or the public could argue that Selznick’s sexual content was immoral. Furthermore, Weaver’s lighthearted tone indicates that he does not predict a moral boycott of the film.

The Legion of Decency was a lone dissenter in the sea of positive reviews of *Gone with the Wind*, giving the film a “B” under its separate rating system. “B” was the second lowest classification that a film could receive, above “C” for condemned. By giving *Gone with the Wind* a “B” rating, the Legion of Decency deemed the film “Morally Objectionable in Part for All.” The Legion listed its objections to the film as: “The low moral character, principles and behavior of the main figures as depicted in the film; suggestive implications; the attractive portrayal of the immoral character of a supporting role in the story.” Essentially, the Legion’s objections mirrored Breen’s cautions to Selznick about the final picture. The summary indicates a concern over Scarlett’s morality, as well as the “attractive portrayal of the immoral character of a supporting role,” a reference to the film’s brothel madame Belle Watling, a character of whom Breen was also wary. Consequently, it seems that the Legion delivered the judgment of *Gone with the Wind* that Breen and the PCA would not—they deemed the film immoral and not in compliance with the Production Code.

The American public did not share the Legion’s concerns. Unparalleled ticket sales followed film critics’ glowing reviews, indicating that viewers concurred with the media rather than the Legion. During its first run in theaters, *Gone with the Wind* sold 202 million tickets, though America’s population was just 130 million at the time. Far from being put off by the film’s scandalous content, many Americans were clearly enticed to multiple

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238 Haskell, Frankly, My Dear, 5.
viewings. Some reporters felt that far from corrupting the nation, the film provided an opportunity for moral education. One newspaper article suggested:

Love interest, of varying degrees, runs throughout the picture, and the unselfish love of Miss de Havilland, as Melanie, contrasted with the selfish love of Scarlett can be made the subject of essay contests in which participants may be ranged from high school youngsters to persons of all other ages.²³⁹

In contrast with the Legion’s fears that the immorality present in Gone with the Wind would corrupt its viewers and encourage imitation, a mindset rooted in the Payne Studies of the early 1930s, this article suggests that movie audiences could resist imitating what they saw on screen. Instead, the author believed that Gone with the Wind could educate viewers about different kinds of love, and that audiences would be able to discern that Melanie is “unselfish” while Scarlett is “selfish.” The author’s trust in the intelligence and moral fortitude of viewers separates the release of Gone with the Wind from the 1930s belief that immoral films create immoral audiences.

Whether or not they received the education the aforementioned article suggests, American women could empathize with Scarlett, the strong willed heroine that Breen and the PCA feared. By the late 1930s, radical campaigns to alter the definition of marriage had begun to exert influence on American society. As a result, more Americans viewed marriage as a partnership rooted in passion and equality, rather than control and social order. The 1930s saw a proliferation of adolescent courtship, greater recognition of the need for birth control by the American courts, and the publication of a handful of sexual manuals that emphasized female desire and satisfaction. However, as social historian Christina Simmons notes, women’s subordinate role in marriage remained largely unchanged, despite this

²³⁹ Unspecified article in Hollywood and the Production Code.
gradual ideological liberalization.\textsuperscript{240} As a heroine who pushed the boundaries of accepted sexual norms strictly within the confines of traditional marriage, Scarlett embodies the tension inherent in women’s roles in the 1930s.

Thus film scholar Molly Haskell’s assertion that Margaret Mitchell “[created] in Scarlett a Jazz Age heroine transplanted to the Civil War” rings true for Selznick’s film as well.\textsuperscript{241} Watching \textit{Gone with the Wind} provided American audiences with a way to escape the heavy mantle of traditional gender expectations without risking their own reputations. While seated in the theater, American women could idolize Scarlett’s progressive choices to marry her sister’s fiancé for utilitarian purposes, or deny her husband access to her body, and still resume their roles as dutiful wives and daughters once they exited.\textsuperscript{242} Scarlett is a far cry from the feminist rebels who would redefine America’s expectations for marriage in the 1970s, with her pleasure in marital rape being just one marker of difference. Gloria Steinem once deplored Scarlett for her corseted eighteen-inch waist, a powerful image of female constraint.\textsuperscript{243} However, Scarlett’s is a constrained rebellion that mirrors the constraints on American women in the late 1930s. It is this constrained rebellion that both enamored Scarlett to audiences and made her troubling to the PCA.

Although \textit{Gone with the Wind}'s representation of sexuality, and especially the film’s willful heroine, may have concerned Breen and the PCA, the fact remains that they endorsed the film. Unlike \textit{She Done Him Wrong} and other scandalous films released before 1934, the PCA gave \textit{Gone with the Wind} a seal, a symbol that indicated the film’s adherence

\textsuperscript{241} Haskell, \textit{Frankly, My Dear}, 11.
\textsuperscript{242} Cahn, \textit{Sexual Reckonings}, 4-5.
\textsuperscript{243} Haskell, \textit{Frankly, My Dear}, 20.
to the Code. By giving the film a seal, the PCA sent a message to the American public that its sexual mores would not corrupt the nation. Though the dialogue about the effects of films on audiences may have softened since the publication of Our Movie Made Children, the concept that films had a powerful impact on their viewers lingered. As the organizations that wrote Will Hays concerning Gone with the Wind’s treatment of African Americans argued in their letter: “Motion pictures form such a large part of our recreation and education, that it is essential to have them foster race tolerance and good citizenship.”

These authors, and many other Americans, still believed that the PCA should require films to display moral values with the hope of instilling these values in the audience.

By giving Gone with the Wind a seal, the PCA effectively condoned Scarlett’s conduct within the film and placed her within the hierarchy of acceptable American sexuality. Despite the rampant media anticipation of the film’s release, the American public was not made aware of the back room quibbling between Breen and Selznick over plot, dialogue, and costuming. As far as audiences knew, Breen and Selznick supported and endorsed Gone with the Wind equally. Because the film received PCA support, female viewers watching Gone with the Wind discovered a new kind of heroine and possibly a new way to behave. When female viewers saw Scarlett—who never showed remorse for her three marriages, none of which were for love, who used her feminine wiles to secure financial wellbeing, or even lusted for an unattainable married man—they could at least dream of refusing to apologize for their own sexuality, even if, as the credits rolled, they settled back into their roles as old maids, housewives, and virginal daughters.

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244 Johnson and Waller to Hays, May 12, 1939, Hollywood and the Production Code.
VI. “Quite a Girl:” The Morality of Gentlemen Prefer Blondes

After enjoying more than a decade of undisputed autonomy, PCA’s authority began to erode as outside pressure forced the movie industry to change. The first shift came in 1945, when the figurehead of the Code and self-regulation, Will Hays, retired from the MPPDA. Eric Johnson, a businessman and former president of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, replaced Hays, and the MPPDA marked the transition by changing its name to the Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA). Because Joseph Breen, the longtime enforcer of the Code, remained in office, Hays’ departure was only associated with the stringency of the Code in the mind of the public. In contrast to this superficial change, two Supreme Court Cases of the late 1940s and early 1950s did have a concrete effect on how movies were produced, and thus on the efficacy of the Code. However, even as the foundation for the authority the Code began to give way, the PCA was able to maintain their control of the film industry by stressing the importance of morality in an arena that still mattered to the public—female sexuality.

The first court case to affect film production was the United States v. Paramount, 1948. In the Paramount Decision, the Supreme Court ruled the studio system, which had governed film production since the inception of the industry, illegal. The studio system had allowed a group of major production studios, such as Metro-Goldwyn Meyer and Paramount, to monopolize the film industry through vertical integration. Under the system, the studios had binding contracts with scriptwriters, actors, and—most importantly—theaters. Until the 1948 ruling, it was legal for Paramount to own theaters across the country, which were then licensed to screen only Paramount films. Since the major film

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246 Miller, Censored Hollywood, 137.
studios controlled the majority of the country’s theaters, it was impossible for an independent film to thrive. In this environment, many foreign films that did not have the financial backing or moral content necessary to apply for a PCA seal floundered in small art house cinemas. In the 1948 case, the Supreme Court declared that the studio system violated anti-trust laws, and required the studios to abandon their theater holdings. Due to the increased freedom within the industry, 20 percent of films released in 1949 were independent productions. The Paramount Decision was a huge blow for the PCA. While the studio system may have limited the possibilities for film exhibitors and independent film producers, it was a crucial element in enforcing the Code. Because the movie theaters were beholden to major studios prior to 1948, they—like the studios—were subject to the rules and regulations of the PCA. If PCA denied a seal to any major studio film, there were few independent theaters in which the film could be exhibited. However, after 1948 each film had to be marketed to a theater on its artistic merits rather than its studio of origin, a development that undermined the hegemonic importance of the PCA seal. Because a film without a PCA seal could be shown in theaters, the risk associated with creating a film that infringed on the Code decreased.

The Supreme Court’s decision to eliminate the studio system foreshadowed a need for increased artistic freedom within the industry. The push to liberalize the film industry came to fruition in the 1952 Miracle Decision, the second Supreme Court case to alter the production of movies in a four-year span. The Miracle Decision got its name from Roberto Rosselini’s 1948 film *The Miracle*, which was banned in New York on the grounds that it

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was sacrilegious. The Miracle Decision was an attempt to overturn a previous Supreme Court case from 1915, which had ruled state censorship constitutional and thus denied films the First Amendment right of free speech. The court based their 1915 decision on the same opinion that the Payne Fund studies would later popularize—that films had a stronger effect on the mind than did literature or radio, and thus that they must be more strictly regulated.

The 1948 Paramount Decision foreshadowed support for the industry’s right to free speech. In their 1948 decision, the Supreme Court stated, “...we have no doubt that motion pictures, like newspapers and radio, are included in the press whose freedom is guaranteed by the First Amendment.” In 1952, the court officially overturned its 1915 decision and awarded the film industry protection under the First Amendment. Following the Miracle Decision, films could no longer be altered on the grounds that they were indecent, harmful to the public, or immoral. Only obscenity remained as an acceptable standard by which to regulate the production of films.

While this decision did not alter the language of the Code or the authority of the PCA directly, it did alter their ability to regulate films. Now the PCA could only invoke the Code when they felt the film violated one of its regulations to the point of obscenity—though obscenity remained a vague and poorly defined term.

The PCA was unprepared for these Supreme Court decisions, and thus they were ill-equipped to manage the repercussions, which came swiftly. In the wake of the court cases, members of the media and the American public demanded even greater freedom within the
film industry. Lowell E. Redelings epitomized this sentiment in the October 1949 issue of

*Hollywood Citizen News*, writing:

> There is a crying need in Hollywood films for true situations taken from life as it is lived, not as studio executive heads THINK it is lived. If Production Code revisions will tend to encourage more realism in the industry's product, then a movement should be launched toward this end. [emphasis in original] 255

As Redelings’ quote demonstrates, some members of American audiences had begun to feel that the Code did not exist to uphold morality, but rather to distort reality and present viewers with a sanitized approximation of daily life. Though the Code would remain in place and unchanged for seven years after Redelings’ published his article, public resentment slowly began to chip away at the PCA’s authority in the intervening time. The Supreme Court cases of 1948 and 1952 set in motion the end of the Production Code Era.

The PCA crisis of authority reached its peak in 1953 with the release of *The Moon is Blue*, the first American film to be exhibited in the United States without a PCA seal since the Code became strictly enforced in 1934.256 *The Moon is Blue* followed two men as they competed for the affections of the same woman, who fended off both her suitors by telling them she planned to remain a virgin until her wedding night. The film grossed $3.5 million, a far larger sum than expected. The film’s surprising popularity demonstrated the PCA’s loosening grip on the film industry. The PCA could no longer control the morality of each film presented to the public, and the public didn’t seem to mind the absence of a PCA seal.257 Former PCA member Geoffrey Shurlock remembers the conflict over *The Moon is Blue* as hinging on an esoteric plot requirement of the Code:

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255 Miller, *Censored Hollywood*, 141.
It was a film that treated for comedy a man trying to seduce a girl. One of the really idiotic clauses of the old code said that seduction must never be used for comedy. Since then we’ve learned—we learned from that picture—that the only way that the public will accept seduction without being offended is when it’s treated for comedy.258

As Shurlock indicates, there was no specific element of *The Moon is Blue*, such as an explicitly sexual scene, that made it offensive to the PCA. Instead the PCA felt obliged to refuse its seal because it breached a trivial requirement of the Code. The film’s success demonstrated the growing frustration of American audiences with the increasingly arcane Code—while the Code demanded seduction never be comical, audiences preferred a comic seduction. Because, as Shurlock notes, it “made a bundle of money,” *The Moon is Blue* served as an indicator of how audiences had changed since the Code’s inception.259

Whereas a 1930s audience might have clamored for *The Moon is Blue* to be regulated, a 1950s audience agreed with Lowell E. Redelings that cinema should represent reality rather than a moral ideal.

Despite the changing nature of cinema and the decrease in PCA authority, the early 1950s produced many films that epitomized the Code. *Gentleman Prefer Blondes*, a 1953 film starring Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell, embodied the Code’s vision—it was produced through close collaboration between studio and Administration, and it connoted sex without implying it. The film *Gentleman Prefer Blondes* was far removed from its original source material; it was adapted from a 1949 musical, which in turn was based on a 1925 novel by Anita Loos. In its final incarnation, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* followed Lorelei Lee, played by Monroe, and Dorothy Shaw, played by Russell, as two showgirls on a transatlantic adventure. Lorelei is engaged to wealthy Gus Esmonds—her taste in men

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stems not from passion but from her appreciation for the finer things in life. In contrast, Shaw tends to choose destitute beaus whom she truly loves. Gus’ father doubts Lorelei’s fidelity to his son, assuming she is only drawn to his money, and sends a private detective to monitor Shaw and Lee as they travel to Paris. The detective, Ernie Malone, misconstrues Lorelei’s relationship with a Piggy Beekman, a wealthy man aboard the ship, and Gus is forced to break off his engagement. In the course of the journey, however, Ernie and Dorothy have fallen in love. Ultimately, Lorelei is able to reinstate her engagement to Gus by convincing his father of her devotion, and the two couples are united in a double wedding.260

The PCA and 20th Century Fox, the studio behind Gentlemen Prefer Blondes, collaborated almost seamlessly during the film’s production. The cooperation may have been so effortless in part because the PCA’s contact at Fox was Jason Joy, who had headed the PCA for a brief period in the 1930s. Joy’s history with self-regulation likely made him a more cooperative studio contact for Breen and the Administration. Whatever the reason, Fox complied completely with the PCA’s suggestions for Gentleman Prefer Blondes. In several letters from October 1952, Breen warned Joy about the lyrics to one of the film’s songs, “Little Girl from Little Rock.” Breen noted that the song was a “glorification of immorality,”261 a remark which implies a violation of the Code’s provision against obscenity “in word, gesture, reference, song, joke, or by suggestion.”262 The lyrics that raised Breen’s eyebrows were likely the song’s double entendres in the style of Mae West.

260 Gentlemen Prefer Blondes.
261 Joseph Breen to Jason Joy, October 7, 1952, in Hollywood and the Production Code: Selected Files from the Motion Picture Association of America Production Code Administration Collection (Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Primary Source Microfilm).
262 Maltby, Hollywood Cinema, Appendix I.
including the zinger, “I came to New York and I found out, the one you call your Daddy ain’t your Paw.”263 However, unlike skirmishes over song lyrics in the regulation of previous films, John Adams—Jason Joy’s appointee at Fox—took Breen’s suggestions to heart. In the final version of the film, the offending line above was changed to: “I came to New York and I found out that men are the same everywhere.”264 Though this lyric still connotes sexuality by implying that Monroe and Russell were flirting with men in New York, it no longer suggests a physical relationship with an older man.

In addition to song lyrics, one of the PCA’s greatest concerns about Gentlemen Prefer Blondes was its costuming (See Appendix, Fig. 6). The Code carefully forbade “undue exposure,” and contained a special provision to guard against inappropriate costumes for musical and dance scenes, such as those that dotted Gentlemen Prefer Blondes.265 Although Marilyn Monroe was not yet a household name—she earned her first starring role in 1952—the PCA was well aware that their two leading ladies were sex symbols. In a letter dated November 4, 1952, Breen warned Joy:

> The Marilyn Monroe costume for the dining room sequence and the Jane Russell costume #10 seem acceptable, but great care will have to be exercised in the photographing of these costumes to avoid camera angles in which the breasts will not be fully covered.266

As Breen’s letter indicates, the PCA was highly aware of its actresses’ sex appeal.

Throughout the course of filming, Breen repeated his concern about presenting Monroe and Russell as appropriately as possible. At times, his letters to Joy demonstrate frustration that his warnings are not being taken to heart. In response to risqué wardrobe photos

263 Jason Joy to Joseph Breen, October 3, 1952, in Hollywood and the Production Code: Selected Files from the Motion Picture Association of America Production Code Administration Collection (Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Primary Source Microfilm).
264 Gentlemen Prefer Blondes.
265 Maltby, Hollywood Cinema, Appendix I.
submitted with the final script, Breen wrote on November 14th: “We have already called to your attention by letter and by telephone the importance of this caution with reference to this picture.” However, the lack of communication about wardrobe leading up to the PCA’s granting of a seal on March 25 indicates that Fox was willing to make its costumes more demure.

Perhaps due to the rapid changes in film production, there are salacious facets of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* that the PCA correspondence does not mention, though they might have been called into question in previous years. Jane Russell’s Dorothy, for example, is a smart wisecracker who is allotted her fair share of sexual remarks. The most blatant double entendre, almost reminiscent of Mae West, occurs in the double wedding at the close of the film—Dorothy turns to Lorelei and says, “Remember honey, on your wedding day it’s okay to say yes.” The PCA may have overlooked this dialogue because of its overt reference to saying “I do” at the altar. However, the line’s reference to loss of virginity and consummation are akin to sexual references that were cut from films like *Gone with the Wind* and *She Done Him Wrong*. Other elements of the film, such as Lorelei’s innocent flirtation with an older married man, Piggy, or the fact that Lorelei and Dorothy must remove Malone’s pants to recover pictures that will incriminate Lorelei, may have also been questionable plot elements in earlier years, though they did not violate the letter of the Code. The presence of this risqué plot and dialogue caused the Legion of Decency to issue the film a “B” rating, indicating that the film was “morally objectionable in part for all” due to “[s]uggestive costuming, dialogue and situations.” The Legion’s low rating

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268 *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*.
269 Memo, July 30, 1953, in *Hollywood and the Production Code*.
recalled how the American public might have received the film in late 1930s and early 1940s, when the influence of the Code and the PCA was at its height. But the Legion’s influence was waning at the time of Gentlemen Prefer Blondes’ release, perhaps because the organization’s moral standards were no longer aligned with public sentiment.

Despite the Legion’s conclusion, the PCA raised relatively few complaints against Gentlemen Prefer Blondes, and the studio addressed any critical concerns before the film’s release. As a result, Gentlemen Prefer Blondes serves as an example of a film released to audiences as wholesome entertainment. Audiences and critics also raised few concerns about the moral content of Gentlemen Prefer Blondes. In a review for the Chicago Tribune, Mae Tinee summed up the film by saying, “[it] has excellent color, and famous curves, and Marilyn and Jane do very well with a couple of duets.”

Tinee’s opinion was characteristic of reviews of the film. Though most critics felt that the film wasn’t artistically compelling—the New York Times’ Bosley Crowther called the script “casually scribbled”—few complained about the onscreen portrayal of Monroe and Russell’s sexuality, or branded the film immoral. An article in Variety even commends Gentlemen Prefer Blondes for its ability to dazzle without offending, saying of the film:

[It] has been fashioned into an attractive screen tintuner [sic] with enough sex appeal and escapism to rate a big share of the summer boxoffice [sic]. Presence of Jane Russell and Marilyn Monroe projecting the physical and dialog lines should strain theatre cooling systems and give the ticket windows an excellent run for the money.

As this review indicates, Gentlemen Prefer Blondes had found the perfect dose of sex for the early 1950s—just enough sensuality to keep audiences interested in purchasing tickets, but

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not enough to truly offend. Furthermore, the author of this article rightly notes that it is the presence of two highly sexualized women, rather than the plot or dialog of the film, that will “strain theatre cooling systems.” Gentlemen Prefer Blondes relied on its casting choices to provide sizzle to an otherwise inoffensive script.

The lack of resistance from the PCA, critics, and audiences to Gentlemen Prefer Blondes indicates that American cinema had finally found a model for acceptable on-screen sexuality in the film’s careful balance of sexuality and naiveté. Psychologists Martha Wolfenstein and Nathan Leites predicted this aspect of the Code’s legacy with the publication of Movies: A Psychological Study in 1950. By analyzing the themes and plot twists of a large sample of films released between 1945 and 1949, Wolfstein and Leites’ study attempted to understand the cultural “daydreams” that the cinema fed to the American public.273 Wolfenstein and Leites felt that many of these national daydreams were a product of the Code itself, and they identified the line of sexual impropriety toed in Gentlemen Prefer Blondes as the principal difficulty of American cinema. In their eyes, “The problem of love in current American films is how to make it safe but keep it interesting.”274 This quandary was one particular to American cinema under the Production Code, as it resulted from Code regulations on sexuality. Tracing this dilemma in American cinema, Wolfenstein and Leites observed the emergence of the “good-bad girl” in film. According to their definition, the “good-bad girl” is a character who is portrayed at the film’s opening to be sexually immoral, but who is absolved of her immorality by the film’s close. By enlisting the “good-bad girl” in a film, producers can ensure that audiences will be tantalized but

274 Wolfenstein and Leites, Movies, 19.
ultimately not offended. It is essential to this cinematic archetype, however, that the female character in question has always been morally pure—it is the doubt of her purity by other characters in the film that creates suspense and sexual tension.  

Marilyn Monroe’s character of Lorelei Lee epitomizes Wolfenstein and Leites’ definition of the good-bad girl. When Gentlemen Prefer Blondes opens, Lorelei is engaged to a man whose father does not believe her to be faithful and thus sends a private detective to follow her on her journey to France. This plot development casts aspersions on Lorelei’s character in the eyes of the audience. The audience is aware from an early point in the film that Lorelei is principally attracted to her fiancé Mr. Esmond’s money; she tells Dorothy that falling in love with a poor man is a waste of time, and that she needs to “find happiness and stop having fun.” Thus the audience, along with Mr. Esmond’s father, doubts the purity of Lorelei’s intentions—is she merely using her sexual wiles to hoodwink Mr. Esmond out of his money? After all, Lorelei does seem aware of her powerful effect on her fiancé. When Dorothy asks Lorelei how she will manage to go to France without Mr. Esmond’s father’s approval, Lorelei responds, “Sometimes Mr. Esmonds finds it very difficult to say no to me.” The audiences’ doubts about Lorelei persist once her overseas journey begins. Though Lorelei is never explicitly sexual in her pursuit of Piggy Beekman and his diamond fortune, she certainly toes a line of impropriety that suggests a lack of respect for her fiancé. Lorelei often dances with Mr. Beekman, and even, as Malone’s incriminating photos eventually reveal, meets with him alone in his room. Throughout his

\[275\] Wolfenstein and Leites, Movies, 20.  
\[276\] Gentlemen Prefer Blondes.  
\[277\] Gentlemen Prefer Blondes.
efforts to snoop on Lorelei, Detective Malone serves as a voice for the audience’s doubts about Lorelei, often expressing his distaste for Lorelei’s actions to Dorothy.  

However, at the close of the film, Lorelei is absolved in the eyes of her fiancée, his father, and the audience. In the closing moments of the film, Lorelei finally provides her rationale behind marrying Gus, and insists that while money plays a role, it is not the principal reason for the union. As she explains to Gus’ father, “Don’t you know that a man being rich is just like a girl being pretty? You might not marry a girl because she’s pretty, but my goodness, doesn’t it help?” Thus, despite the doubts of both characters and audience about Lorelei’s chastity, she is revealed at the close of the film to be a woman of pure intentions. This image of virginal purity is cemented in the final scene of the film, when Gus and Lorelei are happily married alongside Malone and Dorothy. The cinematic choice to marry the couples alongside one another draws a parallel between the love of each, and thus recognizes the affection of both pairs to be genuine (See Appendix, Fig. 7).

The sexual innocence that Lorelei displays throughout the film also helps to establish her purity in the eyes of the audience. Though Monroe’s “famous curves” as critic Mae Tinee dubbed them imbue Lorelei with an innate sexual presence on screen, Lorelei’s physical appearance is offset by a complete lack of awareness of the sexual appeal of her body. When Gus bids Lorelei adieu aboard her ship to France, Lorelei listens to his concerns about her trip while simultaneously bouncing up and down on the bed like a small child. While the child-like manner of Lorelei’s actions marks her as innocent, Gus is quickly engrossed in the sexual appeal of his fiancée’s body as she bounces, and must reprimand

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278 Gentlemen Prefer Blondes.
279 Gentlemen Prefer Blondes.
her, “Stop that. It’s most distracting.” After Gus scolds her, Lorelei stops bouncing, clearly unaware that her movements had an effect on onlookers. In a later scene, Lorelei attempts to sneak into Malone’s room through a porthole to retrieve his photos. Examining the porthole from the ship’s deck, Lorelei silently takes her hands to measure the width of the opening, and moves the measurement down to her hips, demonstrating that fitting through the window will be a tight squeeze. Through this series of actions, the audience is reminded of the ample sexual properties of Lorelei’s body. However, because Lorelei performs these actions in earnest to see if she can fit through the porthole, the sexual commentary is in the mind of the viewer rather than in the film itself.

This combination of mental innocence and physical sexuality further complicates Wolfenstein and Leites’ definition of the “good-bad girl.” As the psychologists note, female characters that inhabit a nebulous space between “good” and “bad” on screen, as Monroe’s Lorelei does, “provide an eat-your-cake-and-have-it solution to the old conflict between sacred and profane love. The exciting qualities of the bad woman and the comradely loyalty of the good one are all wrapped up in one package.” With the advent of this cinematic type, audiences need no longer become allies of the good Melanie Wilkes or the bad Scarlett O’Hara as they were obliged to when Gone with the Wind was released. However, interpreting this on-screen character type required more audience participation. Because Lorelei Lee remains pure in the context of Gentlemen Prefer Blondes, the male viewer must first imagine and then project his immoral expectations based on her physical appearance. To reintroduce Laura Mulvey’s theory of the cinematic gaze, the “good-bad girl” exemplifies

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280 Gentlemen Prefer Blondes.
281 Gentlemen Prefer Blondes.
282 Wolfenstein and Leites, Movies, 20.
the idea of “the woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men,” who must project their sexual fantasies onto her pure character.\footnote{Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” \textit{Screen} 16, no. 3 (Fall 1975): 13, JSTOR.}

Laura Mulvey’s theory is especially pertinent to \textit{Gentlemen Prefer Blondes} because of the film’s recurring use of musical numbers and vaudeville. When Monroe and Russell perform their songs and dances, the audience ceases to be separate from the action happening on screen—the song is being performed for the sake of the actresses’ unseen audience. As Mulvey argues, during these performances, “the gaze of the spectator and that of the male characters in the film are neatly combined without breaking narrative verisimilitude.”\footnote{Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure,” 12.} This parallel between the actresses’ audience within the film and their external audience in a movie theater makes it simpler for the male viewer to envision the morally pure performer as the object of his sexual desire. An account of a pre-screening of \textit{Gentlemen Prefer Blondes} demonstrates the reality of this male cinematic gaze. A clip of the film, along with sections of many others, was screened at the debut of CinemaScope, Fox’s widescreen technology. An account of the CinemaScope debut by Barbara Berch Jameson dubbed the new technology was “a little hard on the actors,” because it made them larger than life. However, Jameson noted that when Monroe was first shown onscreen, the male audience began to catcall and applauded in a display of “unbridled male admiration.”\footnote{Barbara Berch Jameson, “Body and Soul,” \textit{New York Times}, July 12, 1953, ProQuest Historical Newspapers.} At this CinemaScope debut, Jameson witnessed the enactment of an audience’s male gaze, which allowed a viewer to make Monroe the object of his sexual desire without making her morally complicit in his fantasy.
Women and girls in 1950s America were expected to replicate the accidental sexuality of the “good-bad girl” in their personal lives. During the 1950s, American culture celebrated women who attracted men of the opposite sex without indulging their immoral sexual desires. Evelyn Millis Duvall’s 1956 manual on dating and sexual behavior *Facts of Life and Love for Teenagers* illuminates the contradictory image expected of young women. As Duvall explains, “The girl with poise, who accepts [a male classmate’s] whistle with a friendly smile that is neither embarrassed nor fresh, often helps the boys to feel that she is approachable without being forward.”

In other words, young women were expected to incite and accept the sexual attention of their male peers, but not to respond with a “fresh” implication of their own sexual desires. In Duvall’s eyes, it was of the utmost importance that any female sexual desires lay dormant. Duvall warns against female masturbation, saying, “[it] makes more difficult adjustments to the marriage partner later,” and advocates sublimation through creative activity as a healthy way of suppressing sexual desire.

In Duvall’s eyes, those girls who do act upon their sexual desire, even in response to the attention they are supposed to incite from their male peers, “do not and cannot really love the men they go out with.” Duvall’s instruction manual on sex and dating describes the ideal sexual role young women were supposed to fill in the 1950s. As Duvall indicates, young women off screen were supposed to embody the “good-bad girl” example they witnessed at the movies by attracting male attention but never acting upon—or even having—their own sexual desires. Women watching *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* needn’t condemn or resist the sexual mores they saw displayed on screen. Instead, Lorelei Lee’s

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287 Duvall, *Facts of Life*, 75-77.  
apparent contradiction between sexual body and chaste actions reflected the sexual ideal for women in the 1950s.

Despite its inherent contradictions, “good-bad girl” archetype was also a method of preserving another 1950s imperative—normality. As Anna Creadick argues in her work on post-war America, the United States clamored to be “normal” in order to regain stability in the wake of World War II. As the Cold War gained intensity, those who were not normal were additionally categorized as traitors to American ideals. The societal imperative to be normal extended to every aspect of an individual’s life, from a normal house in the suburbs to a normal body and sex life. However, as Creadick notes, normal transformed from meaning “average” to “perfect” in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Concepts of normal centered on ideas of the average young, white, heterosexual, physically fit, mentally well, monogamous individual—in short, normal became an ideal rather than a mean.289 The utopic “normal” of the 1950s permeates Gentlemen Prefer Blondes. Only a handful of the film’s characters are of middle age, and these characters are often used for comedic relief. The rest are physically fit, attractive, and shown in pursuit of monogamous, heterosexual relationships. Not a single African American character, or character of any other race, appears on screen in the film. By removing these “indecent” aspects of 1950s society, Gentlemen Prefer Blondes created an onscreen haven for normalized perfection, and thus created a space for Monroe and Russell to act as the archetypes of female normality.

The need to achieve perfection and thus convey normality took a greater toll on women than it did on men. As Simone de Beauvoir argued in The Second Sex, published in

289 Anna G. Creadick, Perfectly Average: The Pursuit of Normality in Postwar America (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010).
1949, women’s morality became closely associated with their normality.\textsuperscript{290} Ironically, while the concept of female normality required a woman to be moral and chaste, it also placed precedence on a sexualized female body. While “normal” sexual behavior for women emphasized monogamy and virginity, the model for a normal female body constructed by sexologist Robert Dickenson in 1945 had the measurements of a pinup girl: 33.5 inch bust, 24 inch waist, and 34.5 inch hips.\textsuperscript{291} Thus while a normal woman’s behavior could not be overtly sexual, her body must appeal to the opposite sex. The emphasis on perfection in “normal” women’s bodies grew in the aftermath of World War II. In 1950, 85% of women wore a bra, a girdle, or both in hopes of achieving the perfect “normal” appearance.\textsuperscript{292} By the end of the decade, the concept of a “normal” female body was so distorted that its newest model, Barbie, had the measurements 36-18-38. Far from rebelling against this unattainable standard, Americans purchased 350,000 Barbies before the end of the year.\textsuperscript{293}

While Marilyn Monroe may not have had an 18-inch waist, her hypersexual body replicates the ideal of a perfect normal that prevailed in the 1950s. As demonstrated by their reaction to Monroe’s Cinema Scope debut, audiences viewed Monroe as a body first and a person second. Monroe spoke to her sexual appeal when she told New York Times reporter Barbara Berch Jamison, “[My] dramatic coach Natasha Lytess tells everyone that I have a great soul—but so far nobody’s interested in it.”\textsuperscript{294} Monroe’s frustration exemplifies the narrow confines that defined women of the 1950s, when a woman’s body was supposed to garner male attention, while her soul remained pure and subservient. This

\textsuperscript{291} Creadick, Perfectly Normal, 34.
\textsuperscript{292} Creadick, Perfectly Normal, 37.
\textsuperscript{293} Creadick, Perfectly Normal, 93.
\textsuperscript{294} Jamison, “Body and Soul.”
“good-bad” dichotomy between the physical and moral also translates to the plot of *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*. At the close of the film, Lorelei has a conversation with her fiancé’s father that echoes Monroe’s interview with Jamison. When Lorelei persuades Mr. Esmond’s father that she truly loves his son, he seems startled by her logic and intelligence, and responds, “They told me you were stupid...you don’t sound stupid to me.” Lorelei shoots back, “I can be smart when it’s important, but most men don’t like it. Except Gus, he’s always been interested in my brains.” But the idea that a man could love a woman for her personality rather than her exterior is short-lived. Mr. Esmond’s father dismisses the concept entirely by stating, “No, no...that much of a fool he’s not.”

In an attempt to intrigue audiences while preserving morality, *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* presented Monroe as a purely aesthetic object, leaving the focus on her sexual body while keeping her personality naïve. On screen, Monroe straddled the “good-bad” line by becoming a woman to be seen and not heard.

In *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, the PCA had finally found the heroine who could fulfill the Code’s mission of creating “entertainment which tends to improve the [human] race,” and thus set a proper example for American audiences.  

Throughout the film, Lorelei Lee maintains her sexual appeal through her body alone, while retaining “normal” sexual behavior by remaining an implied virgin until her wedding day and staying faithful to her fiancée. By tap-dancing through the contradictions of the “good-bad girl” and the confusion of perfection with normality, Lorelei Lee became a symbol for how to safely entrance and how to dazzle without sizzling—the ideal of both the Code and 1950s womanhood.

Ironically, the PCA released *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, with its quintessential Code heroine,

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295 *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes.*
at a time when public faith in and legal standing for the Code were waning. Critics like Lowell E. Redelings and audiences across America sought more realistic plots, and even plots that hinged on previously illicit sexual content, like that of *The Moon is Blue*. However, as standards for what sexual content could be shown on screen broadened, the ideal of a cinematic moral woman remained fixed. Though *The Moon is Blue* treaded into previously unmapped territory as a comedy with a seduction plot, its heroine was a woman who insisted she would keep her virginity until her wedding night. Preserving female morality and limiting female sexual agency remained the last bastion of the PCA and the Code, an area in which the public still welcomed and supported their interference and regulation. As such, the PCA was able to present one of its most conservative representations of female morality in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* even as the foundation for the Code itself began to crumble.
VII. Conclusion

From its inception to its decline, the PCA and the Motion Picture Production Code sought to uphold the moral standards that they hoped to see lived across the nation. Although the application or interpretation of the Code might change from year to year and picture to picture, the ultimate goal of the PCA remained the same—to promote “good taste and decency” among the American public. As the arbiters of American morality, the PCA reacted to changes in the film industry and in the nation when regulating on-screen depictions of female sexuality. In the early 1930s, when America was still reeling from the liberal sexual mores of the Jazz Age 1920s, the PCA retroactively condemned She Done Him Wrong despite its critical and popular success, thus demanding that women not follow the example of Mae West’s sexual agency. By late 1939 and the release of Gone with the Wind, the PCA condoned a vision of sexuality that allowed Scarlett O’Hara to take charge of her sexuality within monogamous relationships. In the early 1950s, even as sex itself became a more common subject of the American screen, films such as Gentlemen Prefer Blondes presented America with heroines that were sexy without having sex, an image that reflected the decade’s preoccupation with physical and sexual normality. Over the 26 years from the Code’s adoption to its dissolution, the images of female sexuality that American audiences could watch on screen became narrower and more conservative, even as PCA rulings and industry standards about the exhibition of sexual activity became more permissive. Furthermore, they did so under the guise of educating the public about acceptable moral behavior—as the depiction of women’s sexuality became more conservative on American screens, women across America were expected to reflect these increasingly conservative values.
In 1954, longtime enforcer of the Code Joseph Breen retired. Breen’s departure from the PCA marked the end of an era in which the Code was law—his replacement, longtime PCA employee Geoffrey Shurlock, felt that the document should be interpreted much more flexibly, using the motto: “There is no hard-and-fast rule about any script.”297 In 1956, the MPAA and the PCA revised the Motion Picture Production Code for the first time since it became the industry standard in 1930. The revised version of the Code allowed for the use of drugs on screen, as well as references to prostitution, depiction of miscegenation, and profanity such as “hell” and “damn.”298 While the industry felt the 1956 Code was an improvement from the outdated 1930 document, the revision was merely a stepping-stone towards an entirely new system. After Shurlock took over the PCA office, he visited Europe to study their film evaluation process. By the time the revision process commenced in 1956, Shurlock had decided that following a classification system, as they did in Europe, was the only logical way to assess American movies.299

Shurlock cites his dissatisfaction with the Code from the release of The Moon is Blue without a PCA seal, a crisis which he felt could have been avoided by a more nuanced application of the Code’s requirements.300 Shurlock explained, “I began to feel that classification was more elastic a system...I was talking about classification as an escape from the rigidity of the old code, which was beginning to show signs of wear.”301 An additional Code revision followed in 1961, allowing greater depiction of “sexual aberration,” an edit intended to increase the studio’s ability to include homosexuality in

297 Miller, Censored Hollywood, 166.
298 Miller, Censored Hollywood, 168.
film. As the content of films became more mature, the public and the Legion of Decency began to agree with Shurlock that a system of classification was a just way to ensure that children and adults were each able to view entertaining and appropriate material. However, MPAA head Eric Johnston lagged behind in the approval of a classification system, still wary that scandalous content on American screens would trigger a backlash of local censor boards. Johnston also felt that individual families should decide what films their child could see, even arguing to Congress that a classification system was undemocratic because it undermined choice.

But change was inevitable—in 1966 Jack Valenti replaced Eric Johnston as MPAA president and the organization rewrote the Code one last time, this time in the form of a prototypical system of classification that would become a ratings system just two years later. Under the new Code, a film could be released with the classification, “Suggested for Mature Audiences,” a label which cautioned against, but did not prohibit, having children in the audience. The first film with this rating, Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? was released in the same year. Because Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf? was a box-office hit, ranking third in revenue for 1966, the MPAA could rest assured that mature films for mature audiences were still marketable and, more importantly, profitable. Following a series of Supreme Court decisions that upheld the power of states “to prevent children being exposed to material permitted for adults,” the MPAA abandoned the Code completely in 1968, transitioning to a ratings system that marked films as either “General,” “Mature,”

302 Sandler, The Naked Truth, 30.
305 Sandler, The Naked Truth, 32.
307 Sandler, The Naked Truth, 36.
“Restricted,” and “Persons Under 16 Not Admitted.”\textsuperscript{308} The MPAA created the Code and Ratings Administration (CARA) to apply these labels, the same organization that determines the ratings of films today. Other aspects of film-regulation have remained equally static—until 2005, Jack Valenti remained at the helm of the MPAA.\textsuperscript{309} Though the MPAA adoption of a ratings system may have seemed a progressive change in 1968, the persistence of a static system and a loyal leader demonstrates that the film industry may have merely traded one Production Code and Will Hays for another.

CARA continues to uphold the skittishness about female sexual agency that began in the Production Code Era. Sex itself, still an American cultural taboo, is four times more likely to earn a film an NC-17 rating than violence. Within this general wariness towards sex, CARA further hinders depictions of female sexual satisfaction, continuing the PCA standard of limiting the number of powerful women in control of their sexuality who can appear on screen. CARA is statistically more likely to approve a film with a rape scene or other form of assault against a female character than it is to approve a film with scenes explicitly depicting female orgasm.\textsuperscript{310} Thus even as the standards for what sexual content can be shown to cinema audiences has widened, the industry’s depiction of female sexuality has continued to be narrow and has even been actively repressed—filmmakers must fight to uphold the artistic integrity of their film while avoiding an NC-17 rating, which represents financial suicide for a film.\textsuperscript{311}

\textsuperscript{308} Maltby, \textit{Hollywood Cinema}, 570.
\textsuperscript{309} Maltby, \textit{Hollywood Cinema}, 570.
\textsuperscript{310} \textit{This Film Is Not Yet Rated}, directed by Kirby Dick (IFC Films, 2006), Netflix.
\textsuperscript{311} \textit{This Film Is Not Yet Rated}.
But the legacy of the Code in American cinema extends beyond the aspects of female sexuality that can be shown on screen. Modern cinematic narratives still mirror the narrative arcs of Code productions—*Pretty Woman*, for example, in which Julia Roberts’ character is first viewed as suspect because she is a prostitute, but is later revealed to be morally pure, is a modern day example of Wolfenstein and Leites “good-bad girl” trope that first emerged in the Production Code Era. The Code Era practice of punishing a sexually deviant female character through a film’s ending also persists in the modern industry. In the film *Cruel Intentions*, the heroine Kathryn is punished for her sexual manipulations with a drug arrest at the end of the film, as well as being ostracized by her former friends. Even in modern cinema, a heroine who defies sexual norms cannot escape formal punishment intended to guide the viewer in an assessment of her morality. Yet despite CARA’s continued efforts to limit female sexual agency, and the persistence of narrative tropes from the Production Code Era, it is important to note that the film industry has progressed in its depiction of female sexuality. In the 1930s, when the Philadelphia censor board routinely removed all references to a woman giving birth from a finished film, it would have been impossible to imagine the financial and critical success of the 2007 film *Juno*, which followed the story of a young woman who becomes pregnant without inserting a didactic lesson on the dangers of teen sex.

Despite the limitations that the Production Code placed on on-screen sexuality, and the relative restrictions still enforced on the industry though CARA and the ratings system, some filmmakers felt nostalgic for the Code after it was abandoned in 1968. George Seaton,
author and director of Code Era films such as *The Miracle on 34th Street*, wistfully recalled the artistry required of filmmakers when the PCA policed their final product. Seaton remarked:

> [Code films] could do a lot more with a closed door and a keyhole. He left the unseen action to the audience’s imagination. If you allow an audience to use its imagination, they can imagine much more than what you show them. A naked woman or a couple rolling in the hay just doesn’t have any impact anymore. It’s been done over and over again. It’s the indirection, the subtlety [sic] that gives it artistry. It doesn’t take any artistry to have people take their clothes off and fornicate in a close shot.\(^{315}\)

Seaton’s remark encapsulates the nostalgia that many filmmakers felt for the Production Code when the ratings system first took effect in 1970s. Many members of the industry felt that the transition from presenting the audience with a series of clues indicating off-screen sexual activity to showing sexual intercourse on screen robbed films of their mystery and artful storytelling. However, what Seaton and like-minded filmmakers failed to note was that the Code did not erase only the physical act of sex from American screens. As long as the PCA limited on-screen representations of sex, they could also prevent representations of sexuality that allowed for female agency.

VIII. Appendix

**Figure 1. Lady Lou as an Object of Desire**

Source: *She Done Him Wrong*, directed by Lowell Sherman (1933; Paramount Studios).

**Figure 2. Lady Lou’s Final Punishment**

Source: *She Done Him Wrong*, directed by Lowell Sherman (1933; Paramount Studios).
Figure 3. Scarlett O'Hara and Rhett Butler

Source: *Gone with the Wind*, directed by Victor Fleming, produced by David Selznick (Warner Brothers, 1939).

Figure 4. Scarlett and Ashley Kiss

Source: *Gone with the Wind*, directed by Victor Fleming, produced by David Selznick (Warner Brothers, 1939).
Figure 5. Scarlett’s Morning After

Source: *Gone with the Wind*, directed by Victor Fleming, produced by David Selznick (Warner Brothers, 1939).

Figure 6. Two Little Girls from Little Rock

Figure 7. Double Wedding

Source: Gentlemen Prefer Blondes, directed by Howard Hawks (1953; Twentieth Century Fox).
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