Mothering the Movies: Women Reformers and Popular Culture

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Women Reformers and Popular Culture

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The Woman's Christian Temperance Union, best known as an antialcohol organization, had a broad censorship program directed at a wide range of cultural production. One of its targets was film. An examination of the WCTU's movie censorship campaigns reveals significant aspects of the middle-class response to the development of film and to other perceived changes in American popular culture. The union's complaints against movies had social power inasmuch as they represented a coherent synopsis of public fears concerning the "evils" of film. This critique gained the support of many Americans at key moments of crisis for the industry, finally forcing it to agree to stricter self-censorship in 1934.

The WCTU waged its battle for movie censorship with the rhetoric of child-saving. Its members fought for federal censorship, promoted and created "educational" films, and strictly controlled their own children's access to movies under the rubric of safety for youths. The organization supported federal regulation in part because it believed that the impact of motion pictures, especially on impressionable children, was too strong to allow the emerging
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movie industry to remain unregulated. The WCTU put forth an agenda that drew upon its role as exemplar of womanly virtues in public action. Perceiving a spatial and moral threat to their role as guardians of youths, WCTU members made concerted attempts through the 1930s to fight for censorship of motion pictures.3

Charting movie attendance rates, the WCTU argued that youths were in greater danger of becoming “addicted” to watching movies than they were of becoming addicted to alcohol. Like some Progressive educators, the WCTU concluded that movies now served as “the greatest factor in the education of youth.” The WCTU’s Department for the Promotion of Purity in Literature and Art (later the Motion Picture Department) promoted and produced independent anti-alcohol films for schools and community groups, as well as censored and regulated films produced by the movie industry. Its desire to offer a “pure” version of American culture to replace the “impure” made the WCTU’s dual goals—of censorship, on the one hand, and of the promotion of educational and “pure” movies for youths, on the other—complementary, not incompatible.

News of motion pictures projected onto large screens in nickelodeons reached middle-class reformers early. The Woman’s Christian Temperance Union published articles about reforming the five-cent theaters in 1906, only one year after they opened. Until about 1910 some hopeful reformers believed that the local movie theater could vanquish the local saloon. The General Federation of Women’s Clubs, for instance, claimed that saloons “have found the competition of the motion picture a more serious foe than the W.C.T.U. or any anti-saloon or anti-cigarette league.” The WCTU, not surprisingly, rejected this view of commercial movies, pointing instead to their potential to corrupt youths as surely as alcohol would. The WCTU’s first published condemnation of movie content demonstrates its fundamental concern for morality in cultural productions. This Union Signal editorial of 1906 criticized the “sensational” aspects of movies, which undermined traditional values: “Natural modesty receives its first shock. Crime is made ‘interesting,’ ‘romantic,’ ‘exciting,’—everything but criminal. Deformities of the human frame are made laughable. Age is represented as a target for youthful scorn and laughter.”9 Depictions of crime and immodesty had been a central part of the Department for the Promotion of Purity in Literature and Art’s definition of “impure” culture since the 1880s. But observations regarding ageism were specific to the new genre and highlighted the appeal of movies to youths.10

The Department for the Promotion of Purity in Literature and Art noted in 1907 disturbing increases in the number of children in movie theater audi-
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ences and unwelcome new theater locations. Union Signal editors observed
that increasing numbers of young girls went to the movies right after school
and that wage-earning girls went when they got off work; boys ("hoodlums")
often frequented the theaters in the evening, as well. Citing the importance of
control over children's activities, the editors solemnly declared, "Eternal
parental vigilance is the price of unsullied young womanhood and manhood." Not only were children increasingly attending the movies, but "from the
downtown districts and cheaper business streets," it was noted, "these nuis-
sances are invading the better class residence portions of the city." WCTU activists entered local campaigns for movie regulation using
rhetoric consistent with Progressive educators' and social scientists' commit-
ment to reforming children's health and hygiene. A focus on popular "pro-
geressive" issues such as health and safety provided the organization with an-
other argument in favor of regulation. The issue of health and safety was a
serious one in the early nickelodeon years. Historian Douglas Gomery con-
cludes that theaters were dangerous places, especially because of the risk of
fire. Concern for the physical safety of movie viewers, particularly children,
locates the WCTU and like-minded reformers squarely within Progressivism.
Some early state laws governing movies restricted the attendance only of
youths because, as labor-protection laws of the era exemplify, it was easier for
the courts to accept laws based on protecting children or women, thereby ex-
cluding adult men from regulatory consideration. New York and New Jersey
had passed laws by 1909, for example, making it illegal "to admit to a kine-
scope or moving picture performance or to any place of entertainment injuri-
ous to health or morals; any child under the age of 16 years, unless accompanied
by parent or guardian." Various rationales for censorship appeared in WCTU publications. Subjects
appropriate for adults and cultivated people might be dangerous, and thus
"obscene," it was argued, when seen by youths or the uncultivated and should
therefore be banned altogether. In a more positive vein, the department praised
serious movie dramas that demonstrated moral lessons. "Realistic" movie plots
derived from respectable novels or the Bible were recommended over "unreal-
istic" westerns, comedies, or gangster movies with sensational action, crime, or
sexually titillating themes. Realistic portrayals of urban crime could be useful,
however, if used to "document" and condemn the evils and dangers of alcohol
use. Drunkenness, seduction, or even violence might be acceptably portrayed
in motion pictures to teach youths the danger of such activities, as long as the
terrible fates of wayward characters were consistently emphasized throughout.
In the mid-1930s the WCTU produced its own films, for instance, with titles
such as *The Beneficent Reprobate*, which purposefully showed the worst results of drinking and smoking to dissuade people from engaging in these activities.  

For the WCTU, the power of film resided in its status as a visual medium that made people, especially children, vulnerable to suggestion. Watching movies could produce in youths “unwonted elation” and an “ungovernable spirit.” The WCTU reported in 1910 that a child arrested on burglary and assault charges told a judge that he had learned how to break into homes from watching the movies, and that another boy had copied a “self-murder” by gas asphyxiation he had seen at a motion picture show. The judge’s account suggests that the WCTU’s discussion of the impact of movies on youths’ subsequent behavior was part of a larger discourse of social science, to which juvenile court judges as well as evangelical laywomen subscribed.

WCTU directors cited studies by social scientists and reformers to demonstrate that the movie industry had consolidated its monopolistic power and gained, by the 1920s and 1930s, large, passive audiences full of youths. “The Motion Picture houses of this Country,” it insisted, “are frequented daily by great numbers of people, including boys and girls of whom it has been estimated 75% are under twenty-four years of age.” Union members believed that in the hands of the consolidated movie industry, a medium with much positive educational potential was instead teaching cultural and moral relativism, thereby alienating youths from the older, Victorian generation. “You are disgusted and stay away from the movies,” it warned parents, “but your children and grand-children are becoming perhaps oblivious to the degrading tendencies of the movies and cease to distinguish good from evil.” At best, movies were creating an amoral, if not wholly immoral, rising generation. WCTU state reports asked suggestively, “To what extent are ‘movies’ responsible for the ‘crime wave’ and the wet political situation?” Through the 1930s, department directors cited increasing “evidence” of the responsibility of movies for inducing youths to antisocial behavior, such as six “well authenticated cases of crime, misdemeanor or delinquency due to influence of motion pictures” and “four runaway marriages resulting from the influence of motion pictures.” To women moral reformers, the evidence suggested a significant loss of maternal control over their children’s behavior as youths spent more and more leisure time in motion picture theaters.

The WCTU’s condemnations of the impact of movies were usually broad and inclusive, rarely mentioning specific titles. The New York *Annual Report* of 1917, however, provides us with uncharacteristically specific information regarding the movies it both approved and opposed:
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Appreciative letters [were] sent to the World's Film Company commenting on clean, wholesome pictures shown, especially, "The Man Who Taught." Protested against the film, "Intolerance," and other vulgar films. . . . Mrs. Lindsay, Mrs. Dennison and others of the county [Albany] called up the mayor and chief of police and protested against the exhibition of "Twilight Sleep," in the actual birth of a child. This latter part was omitted.23

In the case of Twilight Sleep, a WCTU director atypically took the time to specify the reason for the union's protest: a relatively graphic portrayal of childbirth. WCTU members implicitly made distinctions between "good" realism and "bad." The latter included such things as urban crime, prostitution, and the violation of women's privacy in childbirth. Another account described the nature of the cuts made in the offensive scene to satisfy the WCTU: "'Twilight Sleep' was advertised greatly but owing to strong opposition from county union instead of an actual birth being shown with nurse and doctor in attendance, only the faces of two mothers were shown, one in quiet sleep, the other showing traces of suffering." WCTU members interpreted the scene as disrespectful of the sanctity of motherhood and demanded that it be eliminated. Respect for women's purity as mothers, they believed, could be jeopardized by allowing men and youths to watch voyeuristically an honored and private female act. Their protests against Twilight Sleep were based on scenes they interpreted as disruptive of social conventions. In contrast, WCTU complaints against D. W. Griffith's Intolerance owed less to scenes of immodesty or decadence than to his belittling and critical portrayal of female social-purity reformers, who were, it seemed, caricatures of WCTU members. In the film, the interference of the women reformers destroys the life of a woman and her child.24

Historians who discuss Progressive-era rhetoric about the morality and movies often assert that reformers' emphasis on youths masked their prejudice against immigrants, who entered the United States at an unprecedented rate in the early twentieth century. Larry May, for instance, suggests that Progressive reformers wanted to manage and control the introduction of immigrants to American culture and hoped simultaneously to halt a perceived "revolution" in morality. Robert Sklar contends that the procensorship "moralists" (as he deridingly refers to them) focused on youths merely as a way to disguise their class-based agenda.25 The WCTU's regulatory stance was, indeed, partially motivated by its desire to assist immigrant youths in becoming law-abiding citizens. In this context, the WCTU framed its requests for procensorship activism in terms of citizenship. "You are asked to help mobilize public sentiment," a Kentucky report beseeched, "until all motion pictures will reflect a
wholesome attitude toward life and will help to make patriotic citizens instead of creating false ideals and helping to nullify respect for law and order."\textsuperscript{27} The WCTU's interest in youths as citizens can be tied to its class-based fears of immigrants, who, to the organization's members, often represented the poorest and most alien of the urban classes.\textsuperscript{28}

Yet the WCTU's intentions were more complex than this interpretation suggests. In focusing upon youth, the WCTU was putting on its traditional maternal mantle as the protector of children, displaying a tangle of gender, ethnic, and class concerns and, importantly, legitimizing women's participation in the political public sphere. The organization campaigned against "immoral" movies because they were more accessible to children than "obscene" literature. WCTU activists identified their movie censorship goal as the salvation of youths and referred to their censorship efforts as campaigns to "mother the movies."\textsuperscript{29} In fact, some local unions actively recruited mothers by "sending out 5,800 pages of motion picture literature to seven hundred new mothers."\textsuperscript{30} Most unions publicized statistics on children's high movie-attendance rates to dramatize the urgent need for all women (as nurturers and mothers) to take action. Although censorship demands appeared as part of women's unselfish desire to help children, not themselves, the WCTU's focus on youths was also an integral part of its justification of women's political activism.

American women reformers tried to increase pressure for censorship at home through their focus on children around the world. Consequently, the WCTU's fight for the purity of the child viewer was carried on at an international level, as well as at the state and federal levels.\textsuperscript{31} The WCTU was prompted to give its censorship campaign an international focus by the fact that by the 1920s the United States produced approximately "85 per cent of the pictures shown around the world."\textsuperscript{32} Noting that complaints about American movies had been heard "in the Orient," Mexico, Canada, and Europe, the organization called for regulation of all films for international commerce.\textsuperscript{33} In 1926 New York's director of motion pictures, Helen A. Miller, explicitly warned her colleagues that it was important for the United States to present a consistent moral image for American religious missionaries to succeed in gaining converts abroad:

Countries we have long characterized as "heathen" have taken active steps against the American movies. Even Turkey has forbidden children under fifteen years of age to attend the movies "to protect young Turks from the demoralizing effects of American-made films." The infidel nation is aroused to save its children against the Christian nation. . . . Will Hays said in a recent
speech in Berlin "the world-wide distribution of films fill an important part in making people in different lands understand each other," but Sir Hesketh Bell [former governor of Uganda] says, "Nothing has done more to destroy the prestige of the white man among the colored races, than these deplorable pictures." . . . Our missionary magazines are full of the subject and our church bodies are continually calling our attention to the enormity of it.34

For Miller, the need of heathens to censor American movies revealed that Will Hays's promovie propaganda was superficial and false.35

The WCTU's negative view of America's domination of the global film market was linked to its advocacy of pacifism. It condemned films that made war seem exciting to young people, especially after the horrors of World War I. WCTU reformers characterized American movies as "one of the greatest obstacles to World Peace, inasmuch as they create international misunderstanding."36 The WCTU established the Peace and Arbitration Department after World War I and, like many other women's groups, believed in the importance of international alliances in preventing another devastating war. In the 1930s the department protested against newsreels and feature-length films with jingoistic themes: "By inculcating the war spirit through news reel episodes which glamorize the use of military force as the solution of international problems and through numerous feature pictures which make war seem a glorious adventure, the screen continues to present war as an honorable phase of present-day life."37 Fears about glamorizing and glorifying war heightened the WCTU's desire to teach youths to be pacifists.

Articles in the Union Signal such as one entitled "Recent Publicity concerning Film Censorship" reported on the foreign response to Hollywood films. A reporter accompanying president-elect Herbert Hoover to South America in 1928 quoted a Uruguayan editor, who claimed that American movies were a "main obstacle to the proper understanding and esteem between the United States and the South American countries" because they showed only the "cabaret life, the sins of society and crime. The news is filled with bank robberies, Hollywood divorces, gunmen and Lynchings."38 Reports such as this reinforced the claim that popular culture produced in the United States threatened to jeopardize the prestige of the nation and destabilize international relations. Returning from a 1930 national convention of the Federal Motion Picture Council, department director Maude Aldrich expressed racial biases that, at least in part, motivated her call for federal censorship: "The films that are undermining the ideals of the youth of all lands, causing the colored races of the world to distrust the leadership of the white race, and spreading international
misunderstanding, are made in America.”

If the “colored races of the world” saw evidence of lynchings, vigilante justice, adultery, and crime in the United States, they might judge white Americans to be hypocritical, immoral racists. Asserting the need to maintain the prestige and power of North American leadership over South America, the WCTU argued that the United States could not convincingly assert its moral and political influence if its popular culture pictured a society whose people disregarded its laws—including, of course, the WCTU’s prized prohibition law, the Volstead Act.

WCTU concern for the effect of movies on youths not only led the organization to look beyond the borders of the United States, it also encouraged stronger appeals for national censorship and regulation. Agreeing on the dangers of movies to youths within the United States as well as without, the Department for the Promotion of Purity in Literature and Art organized a series of local campaigns designed to convince theater managers to show better movies, to close on Sundays, and to schedule special children’s matinees. The department often targeted theater managers, since they were vulnerable to local community pressure. Reformers argued that even though exhibitors were locked into nationwide movie distribution contracts, they could be flexible regarding what types of movies they showed during those hours and days when the largest numbers of children attended the movies:

Isn’t it time to demand of local theater managers that pictures shown on Friday nights and Saturday afternoons be chosen carefully? A committee representing the General Federation of Women’s Clubs, and similar organizations found that of 800 feature pictures only 39 were fit for children to see, and only 80 fit for any person under twenty to see.

Agreeing that only a small number of Hollywood films were suitable for children’s viewing, the General Federation of Women’s Clubs and the WCTU, among others, attempted to regulate more closely children’s access to commercial leisure activities. Locally based movie censorship attempts often involved investigations of “doubtful” movies followed by complaints to local authorities, such as the chief of police or the mayor. WCTU members also influenced town and municipal elections. For instance, WCTU records show that as the result of special elections, Sunday movies were forbidden in various communities in North Dakota, New Jersey, Ohio, Florida, Illinois, and Pennsylvania in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

Some women’s organizations, including the WCTU, had favored strong federal movie censorship from the first and joined with religious and moral reform
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groups to call for strict regulation. From 1914 through the 1930s, the state and local unions heeded the national WCTU’s call for government regulation of motion pictures and put tremendous energy into lobbying United States congressmen and senators for a series of laws ranging from legislation regulating the relationship between studios and local exhibitors to bills demanding full movie censorship. WCTU state departmental reports indicate that these national campaigns often took priority over campaigns for local or state censorship:

This department [Northern California] has made its major work along legislative lines, principally flooding the United States legislators from California with resolutions and through them urging both houses of Congress to support the Motion Picture bills H.R. 2999, H.R. 4757 by Culkin and H.R. 6472 by Pettingill and later when introduced in the Senate, S-3012 by Neely.

Federal motion picture censorship was never achieved, but the WCTU’s persistent dedication to such a difficult national campaign makes sense in the context of its participation in other national legislative battles. One director sanguinely explained, “That is the way we gained the 18th and 19th amendments.” The department further argued that in light of the large number of movies produced and distributed each year, national censorship would be more efficient and effective.

Affirming its interest in maintaining children’s good morals, the Department for the Promotion of Purity in Literature and Art supported the first proposed federal movie censorship law, the Smith-Hughes Picture Censorship Bill of 1914. Written by Rev. Wilbur Crafts of the International Reform Bureau, this bill created the Federal Motion Picture Commission as part of the Bureau of Education. The commission’s duty was “to censor all films, endorsing the good and condemning those which come under the specifications of what is ‘obscene, indecent, immoral, inhuman, or those that depict a bull-fight, or a prize-fight, or that will corrupt or impair the morals of children or incite to crime.” The department was confident that if educators were appointed as censors, their moral-reform agenda would be similar to its own. It also believed that the above list of taboo subjects—including anything “inhuman”—was broad enough to improve the movies. The WCTU opposed early movies of prizefights, for example, as a sport that encouraged male brutality and illegal betting, incited violence in its audience, and worse, resulted in an “ungovernable spirit” in youths. The WCTU urged its members, as well as other reform and religious organizations, to endorse the bill by sending letters, telegrams, resolutions, and petitions to Washington. Four months after their
initial calls for action, however, union leaders reported that “very few petitions” had been received in Congress and that the bill would probably be indefinitely held up in the House Committee on Education. At this early stage, it seems, the WCTU could not successfully rally its large membership to the movie censorship cause, even by petitioning, a technique at which it had become so adept. The extraordinary effort WCTU members were giving at that time to woman’s suffrage, war work, and the passage of national prohibition diverted their attention from the movie issue, which, they judged, would take years of further public agitation before a consensus was created.32

The WCTU interpreted as a victory for children the Supreme Court’s first ruling on censorship and motion pictures in 1915. The judges decided that movie censorship was not in violation of the First or Fourteenth Amendments of the Constitution because movies were not art, but merely commercial products made for profit and open to regulation as “a business pure and simple.” This ruling was important because it legitimized prior restraint, allowing a movie to be evaluated by a governmental agency before it was seen by the public.33 Subsequent WCTU reports reiterated and supported the Court’s decision: “[The movie producers’] goal—self stated, is ‘profit.’ ‘Does It Pay’ is their slogan. All is grist that comes to their mill—children, youth, foreigners who are trying to learn the meaning of Christian civilization, as well as the thronging adults who are ever looking for the latest thrill.”34 The movie industry’s status as a money-making business was used to suggest that it had no regard for the moral ramifications of its products. Ironically, this attack on the profit motive constituted a critique of capitalism that came from within the very middle classes that promoted it.

Agitation for federal regulation of the movie industry gained momentum only in the early 1920s, after World War I had ended, and Prohibition and woman’s suffrage had been achieved. A series of scandals over the dissipated life-styles of famous actors and actresses—accompanied by a noticeable proliferation of “sex pictures”—helped precipitate the first of two major crises for the movie industry. A noticeable decrease in middle-class movie attendance and more calls from the public for national movie censorship forced a response from the movie industry. In 1922 the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America hired the former postmaster general, Will Hays, to oversee the upgrading of morals in the movies.35 Reform groups interested in protecting children such as the WCTU, the General Federation of Women’s Clubs, and the National Congress of Parents and Teachers were initially optimistic that Hays would stand by his pledge to make “progress in ‘estimating and maintaining the highest possible moral and artistic standard of motion picture production.’”36 Nevertheless, the WCTU
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downplayed the industry measures as temporary because they were noncompulsory and insisted, "We feel impressed with the need of a Federal law for the control of the motion picture business of the whole country."57

The national WCTU’s increasing belief that movies had become the central cultural influence for youth prompted it in 1925 to officially rename its Department for the Promotion of Purity in Literature and Art: it became the "Motion Picture Department" to underscore its ongoing fight for movie censorship laws. This renaming reflected the department’s steady shift of focus away from books and paintings and toward movie censorship in the second decade of the twentieth century.58 Equally important, after the successful passage of Prohibition, movie censorship came to be seen by WCTU leaders as a political reform cause that might provide the national organization with a new and broader justification for its existence. The fight for movie censorship legislation became part of a national WCTU strategy to increase membership by highlighting this popular reform issue of the 1920s and 1930s.59

The final report of the national Department for the Promotion of Purity in Literature and Art, written by Director Harriet Pritchard in 1925, stressed that the department had worked to produce and support “pure” temperance movies for children since 1914:

We believe the respectable shows [antialcohol and other educational movies in schools] will counteract the desire in the hearts of the children for the sensational and dangerous pictures that are now being presented to them in the public movies. It is ten years since we made arrangements to have moving pictures used, knowing that they would be helpful in Scientific Temperance Instruction.

Pritchard’s report emphasized the WCTU’s growing conviction that “the movies constitute much of the education of many.”60 She offered a vision of the power of movies over youths that not only justified but also demanded the creation of the Motion Picture Department:

Shall this [movie industry] education produce graduates of the type of the 14 year-old girl murderers, of the Leopold-Loeb super-intellectuals criminal breed, of the flapper who is a potential mother and may reproduce more of the same, of the foreigner, the fool and the traitor who consider the 18th Amendment a joke and laugh at the Stars and Stripes?

This dramatic rhetorical question affirmed that much was at stake in the WCTU’s support of movie censorship. Indeed, the regulation of literature, art, and even popular journalism seemed far less important than that of motion
pictures, for "an evil incident in a newspaper does not have, perhaps, one-tenth the bad influence upon human conduct as would ensue if the same story were depicted in motion pictures."\(^{61}\)

The work of the new Motion Picture Department began with its leaders testifying to Congress against self-regulation by the movie industry. The national department director, Maude Aldrich, reported that she and Mary Caldwell, the state director for Tennessee, attended the 1926 hearings on federal regulation held by the House Committee on Education, where Caldwell "gave a very convincing testimony as to her efforts to co-operate along lines suggested by the Motion Picture Industry, and of her failure to get better pictures, or to check the showing of the worst ones by the co-operation."\(^{62}\) As the WCTU’s voice on this issue, Maude Aldrich became a nationally visible procensorship leader. This visibility gained her positions as a lecturer for and member of the board of directors of the Federal Motion Picture Council in America, an organization instrumental in working for censorship both nationally and internationally.\(^ {63}\) In 1926, for instance, Aldrich gave “some 300 addresses,” more than five per week, to various organizations.\(^ {64}\) She also published her views in periodicals such as the *National Grange Magazine*, *Woman’s Missionary Friend*, and *Twentieth Century Progress*, as well as the *Union Signal*.\(^ {65}\)

The Motion Picture Department organized its procensorship fight around an attack on the motion picture industry’s purported predominance in American popular culture—in effect, its cultural hegemony.\(^ {66}\) Aldrich began her department’s campaign with a series of articles in the *Union Signal*: “What the People Want,” “What the Exhibitor Wants,” “Moral Standards of Motion Pictures,” and “Endorsing Motion Pictures.” Each article explained a different aspect of the industry’s increasing control of motion pictures, such as the requirement that local exhibitors book a block of twelve to fifteen films at a time, sight unseen (the practices known as “block booking and “blind selling”).\(^ {67}\) These practices particularly hampered any potential cooperation between sympathetic distributors and local procensorship citizen groups.\(^ {68}\) WCTU activists stressed that federal censorship laws were imperative because the motion picture industry was now “a great trust” that had to be controlled centrally to ensure effective regulation in the public interest.\(^ {69}\) By distributing concrete information about the economic power of the movie industry, Aldrich galvanized WCTU members to join in the Motion Picture Department’s crusade.

The Hays Office became adept at deflecting reformers’ critiques by promising with great fanfare to “clean up the industry.” These announcements temporarily assuaged many reformers and the larger public that their protests were making an impact.\(^ {70}\) In response to the WCTU’s protests during Prohibition
against films that showed people drinking with impunity, it issued—and widely publicized—guidelines requiring the industry to “make certain that into no picture there be allowed to enter any ‘shot’ of drinking scenes, manufacture, or undue effects of liquor.”71 Although these guidelines were not systematically observed, the Hays Office’s apparent acceptance of them served in the short term to dissipate the force of the WCTU’s complaints. Indeed, hiring Will Hays was a brilliant public relations move by the movie industry rather than a real commitment to reform the content of motion pictures.

A 1928 article submitted to the *Union Signal* by Jason Joy, industrial relations director for the MPPDA, illustrates the public relations maneuvers of the industry.72 Joy’s article, entitled “How Women Can Help for Better Films,” began with a flattering statement about how the industry was “eager” for the WCTU’s opinion and dependent on its support. Next, he presented WCTU members with a “plan of co-operation.” This proposal mimicked the industry-approved strategy of 1916–20 adopted by the National Committee for Better Films (and sponsored by the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures), calling for the WCTU to publicize those films it approved of, while remaining silent about those films of which it disapproved.73 Joy took the opportunity to chide WCTU activists’ practice of making vocal protests against particular films: “Therein lies the greatest obstacle to successful club work with motion pictures—this eternal looking for flaws.”74 Whereas other women’s groups affiliated with the Committee for Better Films had refrained from fighting for legal censorship, focusing instead on inducing local exhibitors voluntarily to schedule proper movies for children, the WCTU had repeatedly forced the issue into the legal and political spheres by fighting for regulatory laws.

Maude Aldrich, of the national Motion Picture Department, responded sarcastically to Joy’s letter: “This would, indeed, be a most excellent cooperation in their own interest, for if we will advertise the good pictures they will advertise the bad ones and in this way get the largest possible gate-receipts from both.”75 Members of the WCTU, she explained, were dedicated to acting as surrogate parents, to help “neglected” children, “who most need protection from undesirable films and . . . are the ones who receive the least protection through indorsed (sic) lists of films.” Endorsed lists would only be read by responsible parents and so would not help children who attended movies without guidance. The utility of such endorsements was clearly limited.76 In spite of Joy’s attempts, legal censorship remained the national WCTU’s goal.

Remaining unconvinced of the virtues of the movie industry, department officials claimed that as the public waited patiently for self-regulation, the industry had produced “hundreds of the most artistic underworld films which
the mind of man can devise."77 By negatively characterizing Hollywood productions as representing the "artistic underworld," they obliquely identified the movie industry with a drug culture, as well as with a bohemian culture that ostensibly subverted America's moral and aesthetic standards through an obsession with sensuality, an overexposure of the female form, and a reliance on romantic plots that included adultery. Hollywood producers were charged with manipulating young audiences: "Low standards of life and conduct and excessive dependence upon thrill tend to empty a human life and the emptier a life is the more dependent it is upon stimuli from without." In criticizing unregulated movies of the 1920s, the WCTU characterized motion picture viewers as dependent, soulless addicts, devoid of any true aesthetic sensibility, and movies themselves as suppliers of empty thrills rather than "pure" ideals.78 This image of the viewer as addict was common among progressive academics and reformers. The WCTU took for granted, however, that its own members would not become addicts; they could objectively view and then critique any movie without suffering from its otherwise harmful effects.

The WCTU's Motion Picture Department achieved its greatest credibility and political and organizational strength in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Its most sophisticated national pro-censorship campaign, in 1930, grew out of the movie industry's attempt to increase audience attendance during the early years of the depression, when movies again became more openly "impure." The new "sex pictures" generated another backlash within large segments of the public, which threatened to result in federal censorship.79 To initiate its campaign, the department sent a resolution to Congress asserting that the motion picture industry had been given ample time to demonstrate its dedication to "clean" films and had failed to do so:

WHEREAS, Present-day methods have proven entirely inadequate to meet the situation, and many pictures shown on the screen depict crime and immorality, scoff at Prohibition and establish false standards of social life, thus signally failing to transmit the best, Therefore Be It Resolved, That we respectfully request that your honorable body enact a law for the federal supervision of motion pictures, establishing higher standards before production for films that are to be licensed for interstate and international commerce.80

Emphasizing the necessity of preproduction intervention, the resolution was distributed in triplicate copies to state directors by national director Maude Aldrich "with a request that they not only encourage the unions to send in these resolutions but that they enlist every other organization possible to assist in the task."81

The political savvy and organizational skills of WCTU members produced
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results. Aldrich noted with satisfaction one news report that within a few weeks of the campaign's launching, "resolutions were reaching Congress from many organizations. The article said, 'apparently some organization is back of the movement.' Our WCTU leaders were actually mobilizing the organizations of the nation." The WCTU saw itself—somewhat grandiosely—as the leading organization within the broader procensorship movement. Demanding federal censorship of motion picture production, WCTU activists asked for and received signed resolutions from a wide variety of middle-class clubs and organizations:

Churches, Missionary Societies, Bible study groups, Sunday schools, Men's Forums, Brotherhoods, Parent-Teacher Associations, D.A.R.'s, Daughters of Confederacy, Women's Clubs, Mother's Circles, Legion Auxiliaries, Rebecca Lodges, Business Men's organizations, Granges, Epworth Leagues, Y.P.B.'s [Young People's Branches of the WCTU], Girl's schools, and many other groups.84

As national director, Aldrich was clearly pleased by the widespread response of state and local WCTUs and other organizations to the procensorship resolution. In 1931 so many religious organizations "enlisted in the movement for federal supervision" that Aldrich modestly stated, "We would not as an organization claim credit for enlisting these great and influential groups in this vitally important movement, but we rejoice in their fellowship together with us and find renewed courage and inspiration in their action."85

Even in the year of its greatest failure, the revocation of the Eighteenth Amendment in 1933, the 355,000-member WCTU still commanded enough strength to organize another national petition drive for censorship.86 Aldrich presided over this procensorship campaign when she "turned in to the United States Congress with personal letters to Congressmen over 100,000 names of persons petitioning for federal supervision."87 Unwilling to acknowledge that much of its power had indeed ended with the repeal of Prohibition—yet recognizing a need to shift priorities after this defeat—the WCTU tried to deemphasize the importance of alcohol to its existence as a women's reform organization:

Motion pictures are having a far more injurious effect upon public morals in general than the saloon ever had. The saloon touched a few millions of people directly and these were in the main adults. The motion picture touches every man, woman, and child in the whole country directly and its character molding effect is appalling.88

This position reflects both an intellectual shift and an organizational strategy that had emerged in the 1920s, whereby movies became the union's new lead-
ing enemy and a new reason for being. Alcohol, the WCTU explained, had in-
directly affected the child through the actions of a drunk parent, but movies
directly affected each child’s character. The “scoffing” at Prohibition in movies,
moreover, helped provide the WCTU with a scapegoat for its earlier failure
and a spur to its new campaign.

The period of the WCTU’s greatest strength as an organization working for
movie censorship was 1925 to 1933. The censorship efforts of the WCTU
and other Protestant organizations, however, were overshadowed in 1934 by
the Catholic Legion of Decency. While the WCTU pushed for federal regula-
tion, a measure that was completely unacceptable to the movie industry, the
Catholics, out of greater concern for the separation of church and state, advo-
cated consumer boycotts. To spur Catholic parents into action, the legion used
tactics familiar to WCTU members such as focusing rhetorically upon the
dangers movies presented to youths: “What a massacre of innocence of youth
is taking place hour by hour!” Aldrich noted the legion’s role in forcing the
movie industry to strengthen its self-censorship mechanisms:

The year [1934] has been notable for the creation of the “Legion of Decency,”
which has given unusual publicity to the character of the films being exhibited
and to the need for more wholesome motion pictures. The immediate effect of
this movement, originated in the Catholic church and now equally shared by
Protestant denominations, has been to cause considerable activity among the
Motion Picture Producers in selecting a number of splendid books and dramas
as motion picture themes. They have also made deletions or stopped produc-
tion in the case of a few films.

Aldrich acknowledged the positive results of the industry’s increased efforts to-
ward self-censorship, specifically its commitment to produce movies based on
‘splendid books,” but also insisted upon the WCTU’s continued dedication to
passing a federal movie censorship law.

The movie industry inaugurated stricter self-censorship in creating the Pro-
duction Code Administration (PCA) in 1934. Lea Jacobs’s thoughtful study of
self-censorship, *The Wages of Sin*, argues that 1934 did indeed mark a decisive
turning point in the operation of the Hays Office. The PCA demanded more
thoroughgoing revisions of plot and narrative structure, rather than the mere
imposition of facile moralistic endings that had characterized the industry’s
earlier self-regulatory efforts. The new restrictions enabled some WCTU di-
rectors to modify their view of the immediate danger presented by the
movies. The department’s New Jersey director acknowledged improvements
in 1938, noting that the “indecent picture is almost a thing of the past and
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drinking to some extent has been eliminated, as well as other undesirable features." Yet she felt compelled to modify her approval: "However, the work must go on, and every woman at her post is necessary. We have our movie-mad children and the powerful influence of the screen with us, as well as block booking and blind selling, which has been an agitation for the last ten years and which has not yet been definitely settled at Washington."95 The sheer number of young viewers, all "mad" about movies, signaled to her that the American public could never rely on the movie industry's self-control but rather must continue to lobby for federal legislation. Her insistence reflects a bias in the WCTU against the effectiveness of "self-restraint" and in favor of legal restraints. Paradoxically, federal censorship was much less likely to win the support of politicians after 1934, for the industry could point with greater sincerity to its "cleaned up" films as proof that further regulation was unnecessary.

The WCTU's phrase, "mothering the movies," offered a justification for the activism of members, who felt compelled to protect all children, their own and others. "Mothering the movies," also a paradigm for WCTU members' conceptualization of the relationship between motion pictures and audiences, is therefore representative of their choice of solutions to the problems of the movies. Concerns about children were consistently linked by WCTU reformers to their understandings of evangelical internationalism, pacifism, and race, and to their views of the moviegoer as addict. The WCTU's censorship activism was tied, therefore, to its temperance activism. Its members believed that moviegoers were, like children and "heathens," eminently corruptible; like drunkards, they were incapable of self control. The WCTU's lack of faith in self-restraint applied to all moviegoers, but especially youthful ones. "Immoral" movies, in effect, drugged them. The organization had consistently argued that neither drunkards nor drink-sellers could exercise self-control; there was, by extension, no reason to expect that moviemakers or moviegoers could restrain themselves. Insisting "that every public amusement should be not only a pleasure but a moral uplift to humanity," the WCTU asserted that all movie viewers were in need of women's, or mothers', protection and that reforming women could make all forms of cultural consumption safe.96

At the turn of the century and today, censorship advocates have found their most common ideological ground on the subject of the vulnerability of youths. Reformers, judges, and legislators of the Progressive era focused on the susceptibility of youths when deciding what to censor and how to regulate youths' access to books, newspapers, and movies. Laywomen's rhetoric, defining censorship campaigns as programs to "mother the movies," led to high
levels of grass-roots activism amongst the very women who advocated traditional values for themselves and their families. Today, new right and feminist antipornography activists also speak of protecting children as a means to reform culture. Indeed, much of the American public supports laws restricting the access of youths to pornographic films and supports harsh actions against those who create child pornography. The only adult pornography now subject to legal governmental regulation is that which is deemed by "community standards" to be without literary, social, or scientific value.97 Like earlier reformers, the new right argues that censorship is necessary to protect children and traditional "family values."

Woman's Christian Temperance Union members welcomed experts and celebrated every legislative and regulatory advance as a victory for mothers and their children. Whereas some women defined themselves in hostile relation to child-study experts, union members tried to make innovative use of expert knowledge and apply it to their own concerns.98 Historian Molly Ladd-Taylor asserts, "Motherhood was a central organizing principle of Progressive era politics. . . . [B]etween 1890 and 1920 it became an overtly political concern, inextricably tied to state-building and public policy."99 Certainly this generalization is true of the WCTU's agenda. The union's appeal to the state to protect traditional values is ironic given government's reconstructive role: WCTU members, as women, did not consider the possibility that their maternal role as moral caretakers of the family might be usurped by a federal government with expanded regulatory powers. Rather, they believed they could achieve their goals more efficiently through the state. This belief was founded on the assumption that people like them would set the terms of censorship by proposing specific wordings of laws and appointing like-minded reformers and educators to censorship boards. In the long run, however, a centralized government proved corrosive of the very emphasis on volunteerism and individual moral effort that had been the hallmark of WCTU reform. The WCTU's grass-roots style of political action, which functioned so well through the use of petitions and local voluntary actions, was ultimately undermined by its call for government regulation, which removed the site of "mothering" ever farther from the home.

NOTES

1. This essay has been adapted from a chapter in Purifying America: Women, Censorship, and Cultural Reform, 1873–1933, forthcoming from the University of Illinois Press, in its Women in American History series. For discussions of early film, see
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3. For further discussion of the local movements for child matinees, see deCordova, "Ethnography and Exhibition," 91–106.


5. The WCTU's commitment to science and reform represents a fusion of Progressive-era faith in technology and its moral-reform goals.

6. Movies in vaudeville shows represented a middle stage of motion picture presentation, familiarizing a middle-class audience with movies before the growth of nickelodeons (Robert Allen, Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque in American Culture (Chapel Hill, 1991)).


8. The National Board of Censorship was financed by the movie industry. The board created the Committee on Children's Pictures and Programs, run mainly by women from the General Federation of Women's Clubs, to urge parents to control their children's movie-viewing experience rather than fight for censorship (Charles Matthew Feldman, The National Board of Censorship (Review) of Motion Pictures, 1909–1922 (New York, 1977), 194).


11. The year 1907 marked the "first movie censorship ordinance ever passed in this country," in Chicago (see Ira H. Carmen, Movies, Censorship and the Law [Ann Arbor, 1965], 186).


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16. WCTU-produced or -endorsed movies were discussed as early as 1919 in leaflets such as "Making Our Own Motion Pictures" (see Minutes, 1919, 190; and "Motion Pictures," Pennsylvania A. R., 1938, 99).


28. Also see "Resolutions Adopted by the Jubilee Convention," Signal, November 27, 1924, 8.


30. Miller, "Motion Pictures," 162.

31. For a detailed account of the world's WCTU, see Ian Tyrell, Woman's World/Woman's Empire: The Woman's Christian Temperance Union in International Perspective, 1880–1930 (Chapel Hill, 1991).


33. President Obrero of Mexico imposed an embargo on all films from the United States in 1922 (Ruth Inglis, Freedom of the Movies: A Report on Self-Regulation from the Commission on Freedom of the Press [New York, 1974; original copyright 1947], 99).


35. For a discussion of colonialism and censorship, see Ruth Vasey's contribution in this anthology.


37. Lulu Heacock, "Motion Pictures," Southern California A. R., 1938, 94. In New York, newsreels were not subject to state and local censorship regulation after 1927 (Carmen, Movies, 142–43).


44. For an exploration of women's role in the National Board of Censorship, see Andrea Friedman, "'To Protect the Morals of Young People, and Likewise Womanhood': Women and the Regulation of Obscenity in Early Twentieth-Century New York" (paper presented at the Berkshire Conference on Women's History, Rutgers University, June 1990). See also Feldman, National Board of Censorship.


47. For problems with enforcement, see Florence Havens Ayres, "Motion Pictures," New Jersey A. R., 1938, 97.


53. For discussions of these issues, see Carmen, Movies, chap. 1; and Murray
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54. Helen A. Miller's image of the movie producers as obsessed with profit may have been part of a veiled anti-semitism that was sometimes directed at the movie industry (Miller, "Motion Pictures," 1926, 161). See Neal Gabler, *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood* (New York, 1988).


58. State unions had separate Departments for the Promotion of Purity in Literature and Art as late as 1927 (see Katherine L. S. Goddard, "Purity in Literature and Art," *Massachusetts A. R.*, 1927, 83).


61. Ibid., 161.


64. Aldrich, "Motion Pictures," 1926, 176.


70. Maude M. Aldrich, "What the People Want," *Signal*, March 5, 1925, 6.

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72. Joy was a retired official of the American Red Cross and had worked in the War Department (Inglis, Freedom of the Movies, 103).
73. The WCTU’s Department of Social Morality had experimented with a version of this “boost the best” plan in 1920 but had quickly disavowed its utility (Gertrude S. Martin, “What About the Movies?” Signal, March 25, 1920, 5).
75. Maude M. Aldrich, “Motion Pictures,” Signal, December 5, 1925, 12.
78. Ibid.
82. Ibid.
83. In 1929, Aldrich, as national director, spoke to a wide variety of religious conventions, such as the national convention of the Disciples of Christ, the New York Synod of the United Presbyterian Church, and the Methodist Episcopal Church, and successfully convinced them to pass “resolutions for federal supervision of motion pictures providing higher standards at the source of production” (Aldrich, “Motion Pictures,” 1929, 173; and Sayers, “Department of Motion Pictures,” 103).
85. In spite of the WCTU’s professed concerns about “race hatred,” Aldrich unproblematically reported that among the approximately two thousand resolutions sent to Congress in 1931, the “Women of K.K.K.” had registered its approval of censorship along with the Rotary Club and the Girl Scouts (Maude M. Aldrich, “Motion Pictures,” Minutes, 1931, 116).
90. Quoted in Jowett, Film, 248. For a more extensive discussion of the role of Catholics in the censorship movement, see contributions by Francis Couvares in this anthology.
91. Aldrich, “Motion Pictures,” 1934, 172 (emphasis added).
94. Jowett, Film, 254.
95. Ayres, “Motion Pictures,” 97.
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