The Redemption of Leisure: The National Board of Censorship and the Rise of Motion Pictures in New York City, 1900–1920

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Recent work by film scholars and historians has given us a much more detailed and subtle understanding of the movies' impact on American culture. There has been exciting work, too, in analyzing early film audiences as historical subjects—how women and immigrants, in particular, attached meaning to the process of moviegoing and the images on the screen.[1] In these early years, the National Board of Censorship, (N.B.C.) based in New York City, the first center of film production and distribution, emerged as the most important regulatory body for the young industry. Extensive digging into the manuscript archives of the N.B.C. and its parent organization, the People's Institute, proved fruitful in helping to flesh out the rich political, ethnic, and cultural context surrounding early film censorship.

This article focuses on the close connection between the desire of Progressives to redeem what they termed "commercialized leisure" and the business needs of the nascent movie moguls. As John Kasson has suggested in his wonderful book on Coney Island, genteel reformers and amusement entrepreneurs both "wished to manipulate the responses of the multitude—one in the service of social progress, the other in the service of profit."[2] The aim here is to get deeper into the cultural politics surrounding movie censorship, thereby making a small contribution to our growing knowledge of early film development.

"Moral" Reaction to Movies

By 1908 the enormous and unprecedented popularity of "nickelodeon" theaters all over the United States made movies the most spectacular single feature of the commercial amusement world. No longer the exclusive province of the peep show and penny arcade, movies were now being profitably projected before seated, mixed audiences in thousands of makeshift theaters across the country. Especially popular in the tenement and immigrant districts of the big cities, heavily patronized by blue-collar men and women and their children, the movies seemed overnight to have become America's most popular form of cheap entertainment. Nickels and dimes collected in the rude and crowded storefronts and lofts began adding up to small fortunes for movie exhibitors, a "Klondike" in a common analogy of the day. Adventurous entrepreneurs scrambled to convert almost any available space into movie theaters. In 1911 the Motion Picture Patents Company, the first "trust" of movie producers, reported 11,500 theaters across America devoted solely to showing motion pictures; daily attendance that year probably reached five million.[3]

This sudden and staggering boom in movie attendance evoked strenuous and nervous reactions from the nation's guardians of genteel culture. For those who talked seriously about "the moral influence of play" and preferred the literal meaning of the term "recreation," the flood of commercial amusements posed a grave cultural threat. "Why has the love of spontaneous play," wondered Rev. Richard H. Edwards, "given way so largely to the love of being merely amused?" Frederick C. Howe spoke for many as he worried in 1914 that "commercialized leisure is moulding our civilization—not as it should be moulded but as commerce dictates . . . and leisure must be controlled by the community, if it is to become an agency of civilization rather than the reverse." A scientific assessment of the situation, as attempted by the myriad of recreation and amusement surveys of the early twentieth century, seemed a logical first step. Beyond this, the drive for municipal supervision of public recreation and commercial amusements fit comfortably into the Progressive ethos of philanthropists, settlement workers, and urban reformers all over the country. "In a word," asserted Michael M. Davis of the Russell Sage Foundation in 1911, "recreation within the modern city has become a matter of public concern; laissez faire, in recreation as in industry, can no longer be the policy of the state."[4]

Motion pictures inhabited the physical and psychic space of urban street life, in close proximity to dance halls, vaudeville and burlesque houses, pool rooms, and amusement arcades. But they were somehow different—and the attempts of both reformers and the movie industry to accentuate the difference, to split off movies from the seamier side of commercial amusements, began early on. A struggle over the licensing of nickelodeon theaters in New York City during 1908 both illustrated and furthered this movement. It also resulted in the creation of the National Board of Censorship.

At a stormy public hearing in City Hall on December 23, 1908, prominent clergy and laymen urged Mayor George McClellan to close New York's movie houses. Representatives of children's aid soci-

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eties denounced "the darkened rooms" which "have given opportunities for a new form of degeneracy." "Is a man at liberty," demanded Rev. J. M. Foster, "to make money from the morals of people? Is he to profit from the corruption of the minds of children?" Violations of Sunday blue laws (the busiest day for the nickelodeon trade) and safety hazards found in many theaters also brought protests. The mayor responded by revoking the licenses of every movie show in the city, some 550 in all. Exhibitors successfully fought the order with injunctions, but for the following two weeks reports of the Mayor's campaign filled the New York press.[5]

Bubbling just below the surface was the Christian clergy's concern over the widely acknowledged fact that the movie exhibitors were primarily immigrants and Jews. The Interdenominational Committee of the Clergy of Greater New York congratulated the mayor, urging "the hearty, earnest, and determined support of all moral, upright, and Christian people." On Christmas Day the showmen met to form the Moving Picture Exhibitors Association. The *New York Tribune* reported: "Chubby faced Irishmen, with clay pipes between their teeth were there, as well as Hungarians, Italians, Greeks, and just a handful of Germans, but the greater portion of the assembly were Jewish-Americans, who practically control the enterprise."[6] William Fox and Marcus Loew, who had both parlayed cheap penny arcades into lucrative theater chains by this time, emerged as leaders of the group. They typified the exhibitors—a swarm of clothing merchants, fur dealers, junk traders, jewelers, and shoe salesmen, all with a gift for successfully judging the fickle whims of public taste. The shrewdest of them would soon dominate an industry that at first seemed beneath the dignity of traditional sources of capital. Years later, in Hollywood, the moguls would be held up as exemplars of the American Dream. Their own success story provided the key raw material for the Hollywood dream factory. But in these early days the more common view of them was as "dull, ignorant, or vicious men, hungry for money and unscrupulous in the getting of it."[7]

The People's Institute

Although the exhibitors beat Mayor McClellan in court, they realized their victory might prove Pyrrhic. Stories continued to appear linking movie houses to child abuse and prostitution. The mayor released police reports which he said showed "that the rapid growth of the picture business and the reckless disregard of the law by some of the proprietors had developed a class of disorderly women who confine their activities to the moving picture shows, which, operating with darkened rooms, afford unusual facilities for a traffic of scandalous proportions."[8] Cheap vaudeville acts, often accompanying films in the nickelodeons, also brought strong protests. "Peculiarly vicious," complained *Survey* magazine, "is the Yiddish vaudeville given in many lower East Side picture shows." The movie men clearly needed to counter public criticism of their business. Thus, in March 1909 the movie exhibitors, organized now, requested the People's Institute, a civic and educational foundation, to organize some form of censorship. Two months later the movie producers, the Motion Picture Patents Company, joined the effort too. Footing the bill for a "voluntary" censorship, one that promised respectability and more middle-class patronage, seemed a small price to pay.[9]

The desire of the movie men to rationalize their industry, upgrade it, and guarantee their investment meshed neatly with the aims of the People's Institute. Founded in 1897 by Columbia professor Charles Sprague Smith, the institute put forth cultural and educational programs as solvents for the paramount political issue of the day—the "social question," or class conflict. Smith, in his public circulars and in his private correspondence seeking support from leading philanthropists and reformers, consistently set the main goal of the P.I.: "We are seeking to remove misunderstandings now existing between different classes of our society, to place the lessons of history within the reach of the laboring classes." Smith found many supporters such as the industrialist Abram S. Hewitt, who agreed that "unless the wage earning class can be better instructed in the principles of government and economics, the outlook for the future is not very encouraging. I want to do all I can for the diffusion of sound knowledge among the working classes of this city and elsewhere." Toward that end Hewitt arranged for use of the huge Cooper Union hall, rent free, and the People's Institute soon attracted large numbers of working people to its public lectures and adult education classes.[10]

Indeed, the crowds at Cooper Union sometimes proved too rowdy for Smith's taste, "a natural outcome," he wrote, "of the increasing unrest and the ceaseless activity of the revolutionary group of socialists." In the spring of 1908 Smith thought the "unruly turbulent element" was getting out of hand. After a series of heated public gatherings at Cooper Union, some of which required a police presence to maintain order, Smith confided nervously:

> I have never experienced in the ten years of my work with the people anything approaching the unrest, the ferment that there is today, the bitterness. These are an outgrowth, a natural one, of a situation where armies of men are out of employment. We estimate that the numbers must run up toward 200,000 in this city. Practically my entire audience there consists either of the unemployed

> (a small number) or those whose friends and acquaintances are unemployed (almost all the rest). . . . This condition of things furnishes a favorable medium for the development of radical doctrines, for the cultivation of class hatred, and that kind of noxious weed is taking root and growing.[11]

It was at this time, too, that the institute, working with the Woman's Municipal League, made a special investigation of "cheap amusement shows" in New York City. The study divided these into three classes: cheap theaters (offering melodrama, vaudeville, and burlesque), penny arcades, and moving picture variety shows. "The last group," noted the report, "is by far the most important numerically, and the most interesting sociologically." This and other reports argued that movies offered a potential for reform intervention in the cheap amusement field. "We are interested in motion pictures as a moral force because we want more joy in American life, and because we want the joy in American life to be more constructive, more useful. We are not interested in motion pictures as a thing in themselves, but as a means to an end." The P.I. and its allies grasped the true difference between motion pictures and other forms of cheap theater: unlike vaudeville and burlesque the movies were a mass-produced and distributed product, and therefore more easily subject to centralized control. Like Jane Addams at Chicago's Hull House, the P.I. quickly abandoned plans to establish a model nickelodeon — such a flimsy dike could not possibly contain the tide of new theaters in a city's neighborhoods.[12]

The National Board of Censorship

Thus in March 1909 John Collier of the People's Institute, in correspondence with Gustavus Rogers, an attorney representing the beleagured Motion Picture Exhibitors Association, worked out a plan whereby a censorship board administered by the P.I. and funded by the movie exhibitors would pass on all movies shown in New York City. For its part, the Motion Picture Patents Company, the producers' "trust," saw a possibility for strengthening its efforts at economic monopoly by gaining the cultural imprimatur of the new board. The producers encouraged the N.B.C. to go beyond merely stopping the obviously immoral film: "Our Licensees recommend that your basis of criticism be extended so as to condemn pictures that are unusually vulgar and offensive to good taste, and in the opinion of your committee, generally detrimental to motion picture interests, although such pictures may not be indecent, immoral, nor injurious to public morals."[13]

The censorship quickly achieved national clout. By 1914 the N.B.C. claimed to be reviewing 95 percent of the total film output of the country: it either passed a film, suggested changes, or condemned a movie entirely. Mayors, police chiefs, civic groups, and local censoring committees from all over the country subscribed to the board's weekly bulletin. The actual censors, a revolving group of prominent doctors, lawyers, clergymen, and activist women, postulated a very simple psychology at the core of the moviegoer's experience: "Those who are educated by the movies are educated through their hearts and their sense impressions and that sort of education sticks. Every person in an audience has paid admission and for that reason gives his attention willingly. . . . Therefore he gives it his confidence and opens the window of his mind. And what the movie says sinks in."[14]

The reform ideology behind the People's Institute and the National Board of Censorship steadfastly emphasized the importance of leisure-time activities, both for providing moral uplift and for preventing political breakdown. "Commercialized leisure" was merely the flip side of the extraordinary industrial progress made in the nineteenth century. And failure to redeem leisure for the working classes would have disastrous political consequences in the eyes of these reformers. "It is incontrovertible," wrote Maurice Wertheim in a 1910 plea for the reform of New York movie shows,

> that recreation forms part of a normal life, and hence it is true that the absence of recreation has much to do with an abnormal outlook on life, and in the case of the working man has probably as much to do with his ever growing Socialism and his occasional show of force as the conditions under which he works. . . .If we want these people to be normal, content, cheerful workers, we must provide them with ordinary opportunities for recreation, and if we do not we can expect nothing more than an abnormal class, exaggerating their grievances and constantly dissatisfied. Hence, it is just as important to make the workingman satisfied with his lot as to make his lot satisfactory.[15]

In a similar vein Frederic C. Howe wondered rhetorically in 1914, "What shall we do about the motion picture show?" Howe, new director of the People's Institute, was also disturbed over ominous political implications. The question, he suggested, "will be raised again when the movie begins to portray labor struggles, conditions in mine and factory; when it becomes the daily press of industrial groups or classes, of Socialism, syndicalism, and radical opinion." This fascinating projection revealed a kind of fear closely connected to the censorship impulse. The spheres of leisure and politics are seen here again as inextricably intertwined.[16]

The work of the N.B.C., its leaders thought, would pave the way toward uplift of all commercial amusements. "The motion picture," argued N.B.C. director

Orrin Cocks in 1915, "stands out as the one which is helping in a modest way to conserve the home." Families could be found nightly wending their way to the local picture show, and later sitting around the dinner table discussing ideas presented in the neighborhood theaters. The N.B.C., thought Cocks, "appears to express democracy at its best. Here is cooperation between Business and Society, not only for the elimination of the bad but for the development, in wholesome ways, of that which is good in a vast and growing art."[17]

But business seemed to need that cooperation less and less. The Board's last hurrah was a broad campaign against the various legal censorship proposals being pushed on the state and national levels. There is evidence that the film producers bankrolled this anticensorship drive, donating $25,000 in 1914 alone. In 1915 the board changed its name to the National Board of Review, a shift accompanied by ringing defenses of the First Amendment rights of movie makers.[18]

More importantly, the establishment of Hollywood as production center of the industry made the National Board of Review an irrelevant institution by the end of World War I. But the immigrant Jewish exhibitors who led the revolt against the Patents Company "trust" and took over the production end of the business—Fox, Loew, Zukor, Mayer, Laemmle, Schenck, Goldwyn, the Warner brothers—had learned their lesson well. When the newly formed Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America hired Will Hays as their president in 1922, the Hollywood moguls no longer needed a National Board of Censorship. Hays, former Postmaster General and the essence of Republican, Protestant, Midwestern respectability, would provide in a more centralized and internally coherent fashion what the New York reformers had offered in the early days.

The Hollywood public relations machine neatly internalized the N.B.C. experience, regularly soothing the country during the censorship campaigns and sensational scandals of the 1920s. "The old careless, helter-skelter days are over," Will Hays assured America in 1929. "The chieftains of the motion picture now realize their responsibilities as custodians of not only one of the greatest industries in the world but of possibly the most potent instrument in the world for moral influence and education."[19] They realized, too, the intimate ties binding the redemption of leisure and the salvation of profit.

Notes

1 See Lary May, *Screening Out the Past: The Birth of Mass Culture and the Motion Picture Industry* (New York: Oxford, 1980), especially chap. 3, Robert Sklar, *Movie Made America* (New York: Random House, 1975); Garth Jowett, *Film: The Democratic Art* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976); Robert Fisher, "Film Censorship and Progressive Reform: The National Board of Censorship of Motion Pictures, 1909–1922," *Journal of Popular Film* 4:2 (1975):143–156; John L. Fell, *Film and the Narrative Tradition* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1974). On audiences as historical subjects see Kathy Peiss, "Cheap Amusements: Gender Relations and the Use of Leisure Time in New York City, 1880–1920" (Ph.D. dissertation, Brown University, 1982), especially Chapter 5; Elizabeth Ewen, "City Lights: Immigrant Women and the Rise of the Movies," *Signs* 5:3, Supplement (Spring 1980):545–565. For my own work on early movies, see Daniel J. Czitrom, *Media and the American Mind: From Morse to McLuhan* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), Chapter 2, "American Motion Pictures and the New Popular Culture, 1893–1918." Mention should be made, too, of Charles Musser's documentary film, *Before the Nickelodeon: The Early Cinema of Edwin Porter* (1982).

2 John F. Kasson, *Amusing the Million: Coney Island at the Turn of the Century* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978), p. 105.

3 Ralph Casady, Jr., "Monopoly in Motion Picture Production and Distribution: 1908–1915," *Southern California Law Review* 32 (Summer 1959):363. For other contemporary estimates in the early years see sources cited in Czitrom, *Media and the American Mind.*

4 Richard H. Edwards, *Popular Amusements* (New York: Associated Press, 1915), pp. 20–21; Frederic C. Howe, "Leisure," *Survey* 31 (January 3, 1914):415–416; Michael M. Davis, *The Exploitation of Pleasure* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1911), p. 5. A recent and useful summary of contemporary commercial amusement surveys can be found in Alan Havig, "The Commercial Amusement Audience in Early 20th Century American Cities," *Journal of American Culture* (Spring 1982):1–19.

5 *The New York Times,* December 24 and 25, 1908.

6 *The New York Tribune,* December 26, 1908.

7 William Inglis, "Morals and Moving Pictures," *Harper's Weekly* 54 (July 30, 1910):12.

8 *The New York Tribune,* December 29, 1908.

9 "Censorship for Moving Pictures," *Survey* 22 (April 3, 1909):9. See also "The Decay of Vaudeville," *American Magazine* 69 (April 1910):840–848; Raymond Fosdick, *A Report on the Condition of Moving Picture Shows in New York* (New York: n.p., 1911), pp. 10–11. The trade press also began to advise against vaudeville of any kind in movie houses, arguing as early as 1909 that "a properly managed exclusive picture show is in a higher class than a show comprised partly of vaudeville." "Vaudeville or Not?" *The Nickelodeon* 1 (November 1909):134. On the early efforts to attract middle-class patrons see Russell Merritt, "Nickelodeon Theaters 1905–1914: Building an Audience for the Movies," in Tino Balio, ed., *The American Film Industry* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1976), pp. 59–79.

10 Charles Sprague Smith, Circular letter to the press, April 8, 1898, Box 5, Cooper Union Activities; Abram S. Hewitt to Charles Sprague Smith, February 20, 1902, Box 1, Correspondence of the Directors, The Papers of the People's Institute, 1883–1932, Rare Books and Manuscripts Division, New York Public Library. Hereafter cited as P.I. Papers. Similar sentiments can be found in Smith's correspondence with Felix Adler, Jacob Riis, Lyman Abbott, and others. See also Charles Sprague Smith, *Working with the People* (New York: A. Wessels, 1904), and Robert Fisher, "The People's Institute of New York City, 1897–1934: Culture, Progressive Democracy, and the People" (Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 1974).

11 Charles Sprague Smith to John E. Parsons, May 23, 1908, Box 2, Correspondence of the Directors, and to William A. Armstrong, May 21, 1908, Box 4, General Correspondence, P.I. Papers.

12 [John Collier], "Cheap Amusement Shows in Manhattan: Preliminary Report of Investigation," January 31, 1908, p.1; "Morality and Motion Pictures," p. 19, both in Subjects Papers, Papers Relating to the History up to 1926 of the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures, The Records of the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures, Rare Books and Manuscripts Division, New York Public Library. Hereafter cited as NBR Records. On Jane Addams' experience with movies at Hull House, see *Twenty Years at Hull House* (New York: Macmillan, 1910), p. 386.

13 John Collier to Gustavus A. Rogers, March 1, 1909, Subjects Papers, Papers Relating to the History up to 1926 of the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures; Motion Picture Patents Company (H.N.M.) to National Board of Censorship, November 16, 1911, Box 6, Correspondence with Film Companies, NBR Records. Interestingly, the P.I. had recent experience with operating a voluntary censorship of live theater in New York. In 1907 it organized a dramatic department which viewed current plays and reported on their suitability for various audiences—"an indispensable condition for acceptance was that the play should possess educational and artistic features and be without moral blemish." According to *Theatre Magazine,* tens of thousands of people went to plays at reduced rates through P.I.-sponsored tickets. The economic boon was not lost on theater managers: "The managers were prompt to recognize the business value of such a powerful ally. If a play is accepted by the Institute the manager knows that he can count on selling several thousand tickets to school teachers, labor unionists, etc. The fact that managers have begun to submit manuscripts of plays to the Institute for its approval before making the production is significant enough." Even the printed evaluation forms filled out by P.I. censors closely resembled those later used for movies. See "New York City's Censorship of Plays," Box 28, Clippings, 1908–1909, P.I. Papers.

14 *Report of The National Board of Censorship* (New York: National Board of Censorship, 1913), pp. 3–4. See also *The Standards of the National Board of Censorship* (New York: National Board of Censorship, 1914?). For sources on the board's day-to-day operation see Fisher, "Film Censorship and Progressive Reform," and Czitrom, *Media and the American Mind.*

15 Maurice Wertheim, "Suggestions for Legislation for the Improvement of the Condition of Moving Picture Shows in the City of New York," September 19, 1910, pp. 1–2, Subjects Papers, Papers Relating to the History up to 1926 of the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures, NBR Records.

16 Frederic C. Howe, "What to Do With the Motion Picture Show: Shall It Be Censored?" *Outlook* 107 (June 20, 1914):412. See also [John Collier], "The Redemption of Leisure" (1913), typescript, Box 7, Community Center Work and Committee on Recreation, P.I. Papers.

17 Orrin G. Cocks, "Public Amusements Safe Guarded for Moral Health," May 1915, pp. 5, 14, in Subjects Papers, Papers Relating to the History up to 1926 of the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures, NBR Records.

18 On the financial support from producers see 1914 correspondence with Mutual Film Corporation and others in Correspondence with Film Companies, Box 6-7, NBR Records. On the various proposals for legal censorship see Edward De Grazia and Roger K. Newman, *Banned Films: Movies, Censors, and the First Amendment* (New York: Bowker, 1982); Jowett, *Film,* pp. 109–138; Federal Motion Picture Commission, Hearings, 2 parts, 63rd Congress, 2nd Session, 1914 (Washington, D.C.).

19 Will H. Hays, *See and Hear: A Brief History of the Motion Picture and the Development of Sound* (Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America: Hollywood?, 1929), p. 25. In 1917, the National Association of the Motion Picture Industry, precursor to the MPPDA, voted "that the standards of the National Board be adopted officially by the National Association." See Memo from W. D. McGuire, February 2, 1917, in Box 6, Correspondence with Film Companies, NBR Records. This correspondence also reveals the irrelevance of the Board to Hollywood by about 1918.