

Prowlers in the Darkened Cinema: Australian Church Women's Associations and the Arrival of the Motion Picture in Australia

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This article explores the responses of three Christian women's organisations, the WCTU, YWCA and the Anglican Mothers' Union, to the arrival and development of the motion picture industry in Australia. It argues that, as Christian mothers, members of these organisations felt a particular moral responsibility to ensure that the film industry was regulated and censored appropriately. The article charts the evolution of their campaigns which, despite their unease at various elements of the "modern" world about them, encouraged women to act both individually and in organisational groups to make their concerns and demands known both to local cinema owners and political figures. Their responses and engagement with the complex, gendered world of the cinema ultimately changed their view of roles and responsibilities of modern Christian mothers.

Under the cover of darkness, in the halls which housed the early motion pictures in early twentieth-century Australia, people sat in amazement at the scenes in front of their eyes. Some sat in wonder at the technology, while others could not help noticing what was happening to the behaviour of their fellow patrons. As some couples happily smooched their way through the films, several women's organisations which were based on Christian principles began to worry about the effects that the cinema would have on Australian values and behaviour. There were many problems within the modern, urban setting which the WCTU, the YWCA and the Mothers' Union believed threatened the moral and physical safety of their children and, as Marilyn Lake and many others have pointed out, Christian women's organisations made significant efforts to diminish or eliminate these threats even when their campaigns required them to take a stance in opposition to prominent aspects of Australian popular culture (Hyslop, 1976; Allen, 1987; Lake, 1987, 2000). Their motivations for change however were not static. They displayed at various times both a considered admiration for cinema and a great sense of anxiety about the effect it would have on their children and the world in which their children would live. Although they did not want to ban the cinema, they thought that mothers, as

people of integrity, would reform the cinema to protect the interests of children better than any industry could ever achieve. Their efforts to do so make an interesting case study of the pressures felt by many women to come to terms with the modern world around them in twentieth-century Australia.

They watched the unfolding of modern trends with a mixture of alarm and hope. They were aware of, though not comfortable with, the facets of modernity such as rapid industrialisation, urbanisation, and population growth; and the proliferation of new technologies and transportations; the explosion of a mass consumer culture all of which seemed to have made the world move and think at a different speed in the last decades of the nineteenth century (Peiss 1986; Singer 1995; Parker 1997). "People nowadays are pre-occupied," one WCTU president said in 1904, "the times are strenuous. There is a rush and a struggle to live and enjoy life, and to commit sin too, that never before has been so eager and so keen..." (Nolan 1904, 32). By 1927 one Anglican bishop was able to say with a certain kind of regret that, "restlessness and change . . . had done damaging and disintegrating work in the home. There was a continual urge to go somewhere, because we lived in the day of the motor car and the electric tram" (Bishop of Gippsland 1927). The times were busy and stressful, the rush and noise of motor cars was a subject for Mothers' Union prayers, and clergy addressed the increased mobility allowed by electric trams cautiously in sermons. These, and the increasing sexualisation of society, presented a changing sense of the pace and patterns of life, which impinged on the home, and bombarded people with disturbing ideas. The technological advances of the cinema appeared to present mothers with a particular set of modern problems which needed modern responses.

The great hope of Christian women's associations lay in the idea that if mothers could protect their children from the most insidious forces of modernity, the new generations would be better able to shape and define their world of the future (Pascoe 1990; Grimshaw 1993). Evelyn Strang, a WCTU woman in NSW, declared in 1919 that this concern demanded an overarching ability to tackle numerous problems from different angles:

Those who plead and plan for the little ones soon discover that in seeking to help the child we cannot stop with the child, but must touch the innumerable influences which affect its life and development – the child's father and mother, the child's home and environment, literature, amusements, school and teachers, laws governing the community – and so the need arises for the full and splendid equipment of the world-wide-embracing Union to which we belong which was recently described . . . as "the greatest organisation among woman that the world has ever known." The secret of its phenomenal growth and success is not far to seek. Do not our hearts tell us that it is to be found in one word of our title: "Christian?" (Strang 1919)

In the battle to "plead and plan for the little ones" the question of children's entertainments became more than a pleasing diversion. As Anthea

Hyslop has shown in the Australian context and Kathy Peiss and Joanne Meyerowitz have shown in the American context, Christian women busied themselves in creating recreational resources and experiences which would provide children and adolescents with safe, supervised entertainment outside the home (Hyslop 1976; Peiss 1986; Meyerowitz 1988). The sorts of entertainments they offered however did not begin to equal the appeal of the picture entertainments in the early twentieth century.

The motion picture industry arrived in Australia with an initial flourish which caught public attention, and its fairly rapid development heralded a form of mass entertainment popular with both adults and children, but as Ina Bertrand has shown, it was regulated only in a haphazard manner in the early years (Bertrand 1978). The WCTU, Mothers' Union and YWCA were concerned that undesirable content in films might influence morality and social behaviour. They shared their concern about how this might affect children with a large number of magistrates, doctors, teachers, clergy and members of parliament. By the 1930s it would be the subject of many books, specially commissioned reports and Royal Commissions and would change from being regarded as an "invidious" entertainment to being a universally enjoyed and increasingly regulated industry (Bertrand 1978; Collins 1987; Machin 1992). The aim of this paper is to give some sense of the gendered, complex social world surrounding the cinema and to show the changing responses of the churches and especially Christian women's organisations to the excitements and dangers they believed were associated with the cinema in Australia.

PROTESTANT CHRISTIAN WOMEN AND PICTURE ENTERTAINMENTS

Church women had not begun with an aversion to picture entertainments but had, in the first place, helped to host the events which promoted them. The YMCA claimed that their benefit show of stereopticon pictures in 1876 was the first in Melbourne (*Spectator and Methodist Chronicle* 1876). By the 1880s, the ladies' guild of North Melbourne Methodist Church used a stereopticon magic lantern show to raise money for philanthropic causes. In the respectable milieu of the church hall the audience saw pictures of the great cities projected onto a screen, while the local minister provided a commentary (*Spectator* 1880).

Throughout the 1890s when these exciting night time wonder shows were readily available church women presumably attended many performances. Stereopticon operators advertised in the church newspapers stating their availability to for a fee to bring their stereopticon machines and lantern slides to Sunday schools and churches to enable picture teaching. Where such church-run entertainments were available, there was little or no protest from the church-going community. But in relation to *commercial* ventures, the WCTU were uncomfortable with the way that commercial advertising used gendered

imagery to woo a susceptible public. From 1890 onwards the WCTU monitored how images of women were being used in the media. They protested the use of the female image as a method of selling goods, claiming:

That we protest, with religious indignation, against the growing tendency to exhibit the face and forms of women as trade-marks and advertisements by liquor dealers, and tobacconists, and that we regard such exhibitions as degrading to womanhood (WCTU of NSW1890, 19).

This concern would extend in later years to include a condemnation of the portrayal of women on film posters, but in the 1890s, local WCTU women had not yet turned their gaze to potential problems in lighted picture entertainments.

The general harmlessness of lantern shows had lulled Australians into believing that picture entertainments were innocuous, so much so that when the new technology of mutoscope machines quietly arrived in commercial entertainment arcades, nobody initially sought to supervise or assess their content. Though the picture cards which flicked over inside the machine sometimes showed scenarios of which the WCTU would undoubtedly have disapproved – prize fights, for example, or a woman undressing – there was little or no public protest (Shirley and Adams 1989, 6). There is, in fact, no evidence that WCTU women even knew of mutoscope shows until after 1900. In 1903, the Superintendent of the WCTU for Purity in Art and Literature in South Australia made the first WCTU reference to mutoscopes when she commented on how little was known of such entertainments, and that in consequence parents did not know the dangers they posed for their children, “I know children who have been allowed to go to see these, who are belonging to God-fearing people, but all in ignorance of the impurity” (Darby 1903, 53). For mothers, trying to keep abreast of the rapid advances in technology in the entertainment industry, mutoscopes paled into insignificance compared to the extravaganzas being turned on for the population by the Salvation Army.

In 1897, for instance, Herbert Booth and Joseph Perry, both Salvation Army members, made what has been called the first attempt to make a feature film in Australia. The *Passion Films* – a “film” and lecture series – which comprised thirteen films of about three minutes each, showed the birth of Christ, the flight into Egypt, the Last Supper, the trial before Herod and other biblical stories (Pike and Cooper 1998, 4–5). In 1900, their project was far more ambitious. They booked out the Melbourne Town Hall to show *The Stations of the Cross*, which included thirteen films, 200 slides and a musical score which included hymns and popular songs. Commandant Booth and quite frequently his wife, herself a proficient and popular lecturer who frequently used limelight equipment to illustrate other talks, provided the lecture which bound it all together.¹ Such an extravaganza brought church attempts to the forefront of Australian picture entertainments contemporaneously with similar developments in America and Europe (Robinson 1996).²

Crowds flocked to see *The Station of the Cross* in numerous showings

around Melbourne. The Salvation Army was thrilled with the result, not only because it was such a crowd-drawer, but because it provided a type of sermon so modern, which appealed to all the bodily senses so effectively, that they believed the “kinematographe lecture” could not fail to bring about conversions:

It cannot fail to stir the minds and hearts of those who witness it. It is a great assault upon the conscience through the eye and ear gates. While the eyes are applying the truth to the spirit, the ear is pouring it in through the sense of sound. The devil, who often succeeds in utilising the eye while the preacher is trying to reach the mind through the ear, is checkmated (Kyle 1900, 9).

The Salvation Army confidently proclaimed that their “lecture”, as they called it, was “not entertainment” but an opportunity to recruit souls for God. But they were, nevertheless, pleased to notice that the audience was deeply moved by what they saw. The Army noted in a show in Collingwood:

How deeply the emotions were stirred was evidenced by involuntary interjections, moans of pity, sighs of relief. Naturally, these often accompanied the passing of the kinematographe films, and at one point, where an aged martyr is seized and thrown into a river, a regular chorus of “Oh’s!” showed how realistic the martyrdom had been to the onlooker (W.T. 1900, 8) [original emphasis].

One woman was heard to comment on a tram on this particular martyrdom, “wasn’t the water natural. . . and the sudden splash!? no wonder ‘The Age’ writes about it; I don’t see how they could do otherwise” (*War Cry* 1900a, 8). The publicity generated by approving reviews in the *Age* and the *Argus* and the novelty of the kinematographe lectures drew such enormous crowds that purchasing tickets in advance became necessary. One writer to the *War Cry* argued that, “now that the public have come in touch with something that appeals to its very core, the question is bound to be not ‘How are we going to fill it up?’ but ‘How are we going to find room?’ ” (*War Cry* 1900b, 11).

This was an auspicious beginning for Church involvement in the cinema. Other denominations were not as quick to act as the Salvation Army had been however, and by the time they began to consider using the medium of the motion picture in the 1910s, the aura surrounding film had changed considerably. What was exciting as a Church controlled innovation was problematic when commercial ventures were in control, with less reverent goals than the churches wanted. In trying to shape the industry in the ways which fitted a church and purity platform, the relationship between church and cinema industry became increasingly adversarial.

At first cinema owners were sometimes keen to avoid scandals by removing offensive pictures, but if they chose not to co-operate it was sometimes difficult for members of the public to force them to do so. In Adelaide, for instance, the WCTU found in 1903 that picture entertainments were so new that there was no law to prohibit mutoscope machines which

showed indecent scenarios (Maughan 1903, 52–53). They found instead that their only recourse was to appeal to parents to forbid their children to see such picture entertainments. And they hoped that no parent would allow their children to see any mutoscope show which they had not first vetted to ensure that it did not contain anything offensive or which would corrupt the impressionable souls of their children (Darby 1903, 53).

Amusements outside the home had a strong pull on Australians and were facilitated by modern transport – the trams and trains for instance which allowed even people without private transport to enjoy the pleasures of the modern city, and which allowed women, especially, to broaden their horizons beyond the home. In 1903 Lady Tennyson, the wife of the Governor-General of Australia, addressed the Mothers' Union in Sydney and:

impressed upon the mothers of Australia the need to watch and guard, and above all pray, against the insane love of excitement, which is doing immeasurable harm to their young sons and daughters. It seemed that the love of excitement, was the base of most of the evils of the present day, the principal aim among many mothers of all classes being to work and strive to get their children as much self-indulgent pleasure as possible, and to train them to believe that that was the chief object in life (Tennyson 1903).

From 1908, when the first film combines allowed films to be distributed in bulk all over Australia, it became increasingly clear that motion pictures presented the public with a source of novelty and excitement unequalled by any other amusements on offer. What had been a rare amusement put on by the Salvation Army and occasionally by the Lumiere brothers became an amusement in virtually every suburb and town in Australia.

CONTESTATION AND CONSTERNATION

It took only two years for the coexistence of the churches and the cinemas to be laced with rancour and for some aspects of the cinema to gain public disapproval. In 1911 one parish on the corner of Carlile and Chapel Streets in St. Kilda expressed outrage that the movie proprietor directly across the road from the Methodist church loudly banged a drum to attract patrons to his performance during the Sunday evening church service (*Argus* 1911a). Protests by church-goers were heard in councils and Magistrates' courts in Fitzroy and Williamstown. In South Melbourne Councillor Baragwanath declared that, "one of the biggest riots which had taken place in South Melbourne was due to the picture business" (*Argus* 1911b). The Presbyterian church held a crisis meeting in 1912 to discuss the fact that the new practice of "weekending" was meaning even poorer church attendance amongst their most fragile set of parishioners – the young men – who found the lures of the city or camping drew them away from the parish (*Argus* 1912a). They feared that the double effect of young people missing church and "mucking around" would produce

citizens of the future completely uninterested in the teachings of the churches.

By 1912, some churches tried to fight this trend by offering their own motion pictures – in church, or in the church hall. In Katoomba, the popular resort town in the Blue Mountains, the Presbyterian churches had adopted a handbill in order to draw people to their services in which they declared, “the picture of Absalom will be shown at the Presbyterian service, held in Katoomba Amusements Company’s theatre next Sunday evening at 7.30. All hymns will be screened” (*Argus* 1912b). The following year, several Anglicans urged clergy to take up the practice of “picture teaching” because:

[t]he coming of the picture show has a spiritual significance. It is a great fact, and a universal one. There are cinematograph shows, even in Samoa. In every city of Christendom thousands attend the moving-picture show. This already great institution has a relation to older institutions, and they cannot escape being affected thereby. It is going to affect the daily paper as well as the weekly Church “service”. The fault of the Church in the face of a new fact is that of denouncing it instead of interpreting it. . . Let us rail at it if we will, but one thing is sure, the picture method of teaching, so quick, easy and effective, has come to stay. Our picture books and illustrated papers were only the first swallows that indicated the coming of a new condition of things [original emphasis.] (*Church of England Messenger* 1913a).

Some churches no doubt took up this idea, if not with expensive motion pictures then simply by distributing pictures before the sermon, as one Congregational Church in Adelaide did. But most did not. In Katoomba, where the local Presbyterian Church used motion pictures as the draw card of their congregations, the local Congregational Church declared that, “Congregationalists will never descend to this in Katoomba. If we cannot get people to come and listen to the preaching of the Gospel, then we will close up our church, and carry it on elsewhere, where it is appreciated” (*Argus* 1912b).

In 1912, the Pope also gave the Roman Catholics permission to use films in churches provided that the host was not in the church, the film had been vetted by the local priest and the sexes sat apart to prevent wrong-doing (*Argus* 1912c). Several films devoted to the Christian story were distributed in Australia in 1912 and 1913 which were suitable for both Catholic and Protestant audiences. *The Life of Christ* (1912) and *From Manger to Cross* (1913) were portrayals of the fundamental Christian story. These films were greeted by the mainstream press with some excitement. The *Argus* reported that *The Life of Christ* had “no fewer than 42 actors [who] were sent to Palestine and Egypt where they performed before the cinematograph operator”. The film was lauded for its “realistic pictures” including the scourging of Christ and the scene on Calvary. Only the last sentence of the article indicated that such innovations were not being well received by “a large section of the [British] clergy” (*Argus* 1912d). While the general audience appreciated being able to see Palestine and Egypt as if they were there themselves, and to experience the

imagined culture of Biblical times, some sceptics in the church ranks argued that such images and stories could never be represented by mere actors. When *From the Manger to Cross* was screened at the Auditorium in Melbourne in 1913 the reviewer in the *Argus* was pleasantly relieved that the film treated the topic with “beauty and sorrow and reverence” and “without any overacting or staginess”. For instance:

There was no attempt at depicting the supernatural . . . no obviously stage angel of the annunciation. When the miraculous was to be denoted a bright light fell upon the central figure, upon Mary at the annunciation, upon Joseph when he dreamed, upon Christ himself at the miracle of the wine in the marriage of Cana. It was enough to suggest what could not be adequately depicted (*Argus* 1913).

The delicacy of treatment convinced the Rev. W. White (of St. John’s), who confessed to being dubious before he saw the film, to revise his view and to introduce the film to the Melbourne audience by “not only dismiss[ing] [the motion pictures] from criticism but warmly commended them to everybody. They would not only do no harm, he said, but might do much good” (*Argus* 1913). The *Church of England Messenger* agreed that the film was a wonder, bemoaning only the fact that materialism placed the Christian story on the market like any other commodity:

The commercialism of the age protrudes itself. The indefensible part of the whole thing lies in the publicity methods. A rough cut of the Christ by no means beautiful, by no means artistic, set on hoardings, surrounded by whisky advertisements and others of mustard, soap and pickles, is out of place. The management should withdraw them and use more direct methods less likely to offend devout and loving persons (*Church of England Messenger* 1913b).

It was, however, not merely the marketing of Christian films which caused problems in the first years of mass distribution. In a sectarian society the content and interpretation of events involving Christians was occasionally found to be extremely offensive to one denomination or the other. One of the first films to cause a real furore in the Catholic community was a film based on the life of a pope. The distributors of the film in Melbourne had been asked by Dean Phelan to quickly and quietly remove *Sextus V* from display as it was offensive to Catholic belief. But though it was removed from display it was not removed from circulation. It was simply sent on the country film circuit where the local Catholic priest of Port Fairy, Father Rohan, viewed it with dismay. “**When he saw the maliciousness of the picture,**” he declared to newspaper reporters, “**his blood boiled, and he felt inclined to go and kick the machine sky high**” [original emphasis] (*Argus* 1911c). So great was his outrage that he threatened to organise a Catholic boycott of the cinema and his threat led to the film’s removal at great speed (*Argus* 1911d).

The Catholic concern over the ability of motion pictures to mock or distort the beliefs of their denomination was mirrored with sectarian vigour in other

denominations. The criticism of the cinema from church communities therefore became layered. Some groups sought to prove that the cinema in their local area was disruptive and “inexpedient from a religious point of view”, others began to point out that motion pictures were also the vehicles of disagreeable ideas which could mock religion and challenge religious teaching. Local magistrates in fact increasingly expanded the onus on anti-cinema groups to prove that films were not just disruptive in some physical sense but that they contained offensive material as well (*Argus* 1911e). And this imperative helped create an environment which encouraged the description of what was considered most offensive: a defining of what was considered acceptable; of what was considered transgressive; of what was considered a suggestive or corrupting idea.

The churches feared they were losing numbers in their church services to the motion picture shows in their areas, but the public discourse of anxiety framed the problem as more fundamental. Some commentators believed that the lure of the picture show by about 1911–1912 was so intense that children would tell lies, steal or run away just to see them. And they feared that parents as a whole faced the prospect of an entire generation slipping from their control.

Women’s concern on this matter was in line with the mainstream newspapers and the mainstream churches. Both the press and the churches placed a heavy emphasis on the responsibilities of parents in the early 1910s. Around 1911, following the establishment of the children’s court and the publicity surrounding cases heard in it there was, in nearly all secular and religious papers, a near hysteria about the standard of parenting in Australia. On the issue of the cinema with its dubious moral messages Christian women’s organisations felt that mothers all around the world were confronted with a medium which appeared to create and exacerbate the elements of child delinquency which Graeme Davison has described in his examination of the city-bred child and development (Davison 1983). The Mothers’ Union set out on a campaign to warn mothers of the dangers their children faced at motion pictures. They based the campaign on the same grounds as their campaign for sex education a few years later: that no mother who knew the risks that her children faced at cinemas would possibly allow her children to be exposed to such danger (Warne 1999). The danger, they believed, was both moral and physical.

From 1910 onwards Christian women’s organisations therefore engaged with the cultural susceptibility shown by Australians to the medium of cinema and anxiously pointed out the dangers associated with the behaviour of those who were free from supervision in the darkness and who could not see beyond the excitement of the moment. Unaccompanied children, they pointed out, were vulnerable in the dark to paedophiles. But more commonly, they believed, children were subjected to film in its capacity as a mind altering medium which could present a position so complete, so modern and so

exciting that traditional influences and behaviours would be swept away. As the editor of the *Argus* wrote in the leader:

Among all modern agencies for unbalancing the young the cinematograph easily holds first place. It draws children from their homes at night, and allures and fascinates them, providing an excitement for which the craving becomes so intense that not a few of them will steal, tell untruths, and in various ways deceive their parents in order to get these entertainments (*Argus* 1912e).

For mothers who hoped that their children were fine upstanding little people the fact that their children wanted to see corrupting material was bad enough, but the implication that the lure might be strong enough to incline some children to steal to get to the cinema was of deep concern. Such behaviour was inching towards the compulsion of addiction, and they feared that the films themselves gave children ideas about the worth of crime which mothers were neither privy to nor in agreement with.

Psychological theories in the 1910s underlined the enormous manipulative power of “suggestion” which could alter children’s idea of morality through frequent exposure to “American cowboys, Bushranging, House-breaking, Fights . . . Lovers’ jealousies and Quarrels” (*Commonweal* 1910). So intense was the speculation about whether or not crime films induced children to turn to crime, the Special Magistrates’ Association in 1912 commissioned the police constables of Melbourne to undertake a survey in order to gauge the extent and association of child crime with exposure to motion pictures. The questions that the constables were required to ask gave a clear view of what the official concerns were about the patronage of children at cinemas:

Are the shows largely patronised by children?

What is the average age?

What stamp are they? Are they of the leisured or working classes?

How do they obtain the money for admission?

Are they usually accompanied by their parents or adults?

Are the films produced likely to be injurious to their moral character?

At what hour do the shows end?

Do the children go straight home or loiter?

Have these shows in any way assisted to increase the crime records of the city and suburbs? (*Argus* 1912f).

On presenting the report to the minister, the magistrates emphasised that the constables had found many cases of theft connected to children wanting to attend motion pictures, or in imitation of what they had seen at the pictures. They also noted that “sensational” motion pictures such as *Buffalo Bill* and *Deadwood Dick* inflamed the children to the extent that they “hissed” during the shows and left the theatres in gangs and “a spirit of bravado often prevailed afterwards”. Some children had admitted in court that the items they stole, in one case a revolver, was done in imitation of a “crime” motion picture (*Argus* 1912f). In New South Wales concern over the effect of bushranger movies was

so intense that they were banned for the next twenty years (Pike & Cooper 1998, 7). Some voices were heard to protest conclusions drawn from such *ad hoc* evidence. The *Argus* for instance protested at the methods of collecting the evidence and remained sceptical of the findings of the constables. It declared instead that any laxness of youth was more the result of parents moving away from rigid and severe parenting methods than it was the effect of motion pictures (*Argus* 1912f).

In this atmosphere parenting came under severe criticism: church leaders such as Bishop Duhig in Rockhampton began to make ultimatums to parents about what they should or should not allow their children to do:

It is deplorable to think that our city streets and by-ways are nightly filled with crowds of children returning home from picture shows often without any escort . . . We declare that Catholic parents, who allow their children unrestricted liberty in going out at night, are guilty of a grave violation of God's commandments, and we entreat them to correct this abuse (*Argus* 1912g).

These ultimatums to parents were mirrored in the wider community; Robert van Krieken in his work on the rise of state control in child-rearing in Australia, cites one case in 1912 where a boy was separated from his mother and sent to Mittagong Boys' Home because he was, "uncontrollable, goes straight from school to the picture shows and comes home late at night. Mother wants boy sent [to an] institution" (van Krieken 1991, 93). In Victoria, the Premier in 1912, Mr Drysdale Brown, was hesitant to interfere with the motion picture industry. He argued that parents should control their own children. From a political point of view he thought it would, in fact, be more publicly acceptable to put uncontrolled children, "waifs" and "strays" in boys' homes and boarding schools than it would be for the Government to place restrictions on children going to motion pictures (*Argus* 1912h).

The combined effect of Drysdale's words and the evidence which seemed to point to children becoming delinquent from crime motion pictures placed parents campaigning for greater regulation in a difficult position. That is to say, if pro-censorship campaigners gathered evidence that particular children were mimicking crime in film, it appeared from Drysdale's assertion that they may be aiding the removal of the children from their parents rather than achieving any improvement of films. Again and again, those in favour of an unregulated film industry accused their opponents of being humourless and unable to control their own children. One federal MP said, "these picture shows do not have the bad effect on the children that some honourable members would make us believe". His criticism was directed towards, "the section of our community whom nothing can amuse – who are blind and deaf to any form of amusement – and because of this they would prevent other men's children from obtaining healthy entertainment" (*Australian Parliamentary Debates* 1918, 6087).

But both the Mothers' Union and the WCTU agreed by the First World War that motion picture shows *were* part of the modern world, and that children

enjoyed them enormously. Their aim in pressing for greater regulation of the film industry was not to ban the cinema but to force the more influential aspects of the modern world to work within acceptable moral boundaries:

Believing that picture shows have now a place as recreation for the people, we would urge the censors to have all films with a demoralising tendency removed, and as children of all ages are permitted to attend, for their sakes only wholesome and amusing films should be shown (WCTU of NSW 1917, 24, res.6.).

This in effect amounted to a call for government censorship, and many women's groups chose to back this campaign. By 1916, the Victorian section of the National Council of Women which was an umbrella organisation of many women's groups sent two members, Mrs Fossett and Sister Eva to pressure the Victorian Premier to bring in censorship of picture shows and also the material relating to them: the posters, advertisements, post-cards and literature (National Council of Women 1916). By March 1917 when the war-necessitated censorship was in its early stages, the National Council of Women in Victoria developed another strategy; they formed a sub-committee of members and fairly soon after a large committee, to attend films and ascertain whether they were suitable for the public. If they found them undesirable they would alert the censor (National Council of Women 1917, 67). These measures paved the way, they hoped, for greater involvement of women in the censorship system.

THE MOTHER AS CENSOR

Ideally these women's groups wanted to create a more moral and effective system of censorship by getting women on to the censorship boards themselves. In 1917 in Western Australia Bertha Andrews, the State Secretary of the Mothers' Union, announced (with regard to state reforms) that each branch of the Mothers' Union, "is approaching its Member of Parliament asking for support in any reform that may be brought forward to remedy an evil." She suggested a censorship board made up of equal numbers of men and women (Andrews 1918). Their Melbourne counterparts stated that to get anywhere they must organise themselves to have some "definite" scheme planned for adoption, rather than making an open appeal to members of Parliament (Mothers' Union 1918, 12-13).

In the period following the First World War, the concern of the WCTU, Mothers' Union and the YWCA focussed on the increasing representation of "sex problems" and "sex stories" on the screen. Without the benefits of graded films to show which were suitable for adults and which were suitable for children, these organisations felt that the burden of responsibility was falling onerously on parents. Their campaigns to have women involved in the censorship process aimed to raise the level of censorship before the film was released in order to relieve individual parents of the problem on a continual basis. Those concerned by the apparent failure of the censors to eliminate the

representation of extramarital sexuality believed that just as crime films were thought to lead children into crime, so too films with extramarital sex were seen to lead boys and girls astray.

Jean Forsyth revealed this quite sensationally to members of the WCTU in NSW in 1921 when she finished her presidential address at the annual conference by saying:

I cannot conclude without once more drawing attention to the danger lurking in many of the picture show films, to the moral nature of our young people, I am not declaiming against the picture theatres indiscriminately, as I believe that with care they might be of great educational benefit, and wholesome enjoyment. But when they descend to encouraging and catering to the lower side of human nature, as many do, we feel that as women and mothers we must protest for the sake of the young (Forsyth 1921, 24).

Her concern stemmed from a report that she had read by Ellen O'Grady, a deputy police commissioner of New York who claimed that in the seventeen years that she had been policing New York, a noticeable change had occurred in the innocence of children. The reason, O'Grady claimed, was the motion picture:

Children are thinking lust all the time, and they get it at the pictures. If you do not believe me, listen to the list of pictures which are being shown at the pictures to-night, and which children are attending and absorbing. Here is the list: "The Courtesan", "The She-Devil", "The Sex Love", "The Beast", "The Evil Women Do", "The Flame of Passion", "The Gutter Magdalene", "Should a Woman Tell?", "What's Your Husband Doing?", "Respectable by Proxy", "Virtuous Man", and "Virtuous Women" (Forsyth 1921, 24).

Forsyth concluded to her Australian audience, "Sisters, that is in America but it is just as bad here" (Forsyth 1921, 24).

Their concern went beyond these films' depictions of adultery and pre-marital sexual activity. The films presented worlds which were, then as now, unrealistically glamorous. They saw films, in other words, as a highly successful secular and materialist propaganda machine. They were not alone in their fears. One newspaper wrote in 1921:

The trouble was that moving picture producers were likely to Americanise the whole world. The films to-day were not only American but an unfair representation of life's best elements. . . The millionaire who was out to wreck everyone who crossed his path; the butterfly woman with marvellous clothes; the ubiquitous motor car – all were untrue to life. . . The wonderful dresses of these spoiled darlings made the average girl dissatisfied with her lot, and the wonderfully smart exploits of the only son, the apple of his parents' eyes, made boys think their fathers "old buffers". We needed reformed pictures more than the reformed press the Prime Minister advocated. Children should

not be brought up with false ideas about money. The building of national character must have for its foundations purity, industry and economy (*Age* 1921).

In a survey conducted by the Melbourne YWCA about the jobs their working girls dreamed of, they found, not surprisingly, that a large number of girls dreamed of becoming actresses or stage dancers – of taking up a glamorous life – and leaving hard work far behind (Rae 1927, 14–15). The Mothers' Union felt profoundly uncomfortable about such girlish dreams. They tended to think that the dream of being an actress was unrealistic, a false idea implanted in minds which were never likely to achieve them. They realized however the full impact of the cinema for spreading such ideas among the population:

The influence of the moving pictures was shown when it was estimated that each "news reel" was seen by twenty millions of people each week. The visual sense was the most active in the absorption of information. What was seen seemed so much more real than that which was read or heard, especially for children. More than a new art had been created by this invention; a new language – a new method of communicating thought without barriers of language – had been devised (*Age* 1921).

These sorts of comments give us a glimpse of the "newness" of some of the situations that Christian women's groups approached. They could not themselves control the new conceptual process of films. They believed however that if they worked at an international level to pressure film producers, if the mothers of South Africa, Canada, New Zealand and Australia all worked to get "good" films, the American film producers would be forced to give them what they wanted. At a local level, they also believed that censorship boards which included women would be able to offer the same qualities of maternal influence which they had once felt could be most strongly imparted in the home. "Until we have good censoring" they declared, "we will have bad films" (*Argus* 1921).³ And again in 1927, the WA president of the Mothers' Union declared, "we want women on the censorship board. What does a father know about the rearing of his children? The responsibility falls almost entirely on the mother. Therefore she should have some authority in respect of the class of entertainment provided for her children" (Commonwealth of Australia 1927, 519, item 14952).

In some respects the organised campaigns to tame the cinemas were successful in the 1920s. The Mothers' Union had suggested that better lighting and air were essential for the health and safety of patrons, and in 1924 these regulations were brought in. In Victoria a law passed which required films to be graded; and children under fifteen years were not allowed to attend without an accompanying adult. The National Council of Women and the newly established Good Film League were applauded for alerting the censors to any films that were improper in some way.

None of these improvements however really stopped the sexualisation of

children. Nor did it stop sexual exploration among the patrons sitting in the darkened cinemas. All through the 1920s, more and more evidence appeared to confirm the fear that films not only accelerated the sexualisation of children on a mental level but encouraged them to try out what they had seen. Hilda Edwards in Western Australia told the 1927 Royal Commission into the Moving Picture Industry that when she attended cinemas the children displayed a variety of bad behaviour, “in some cases kissing and lying in one another’s arms when the lights are turned down. . . of course in many cases they are only imitating what they see on the screen” (Commonwealth of Australia 1927, 520–521, items 14969–14972).

It was this very danger which gave the biggest boost to convincing women to give realistic sex education to their children, especially to their daughters. Marion Piddington’s book of 1925, *Tell Them!*, argued that boys and girls should both be alerted to the danger that girls might be completely unable to control their sexual passion at certain times in their hormonal cycle and that avoiding any petting at these times was their only safe strategy (Piddington 1925). As late as 1932 the Mothers’ Union reminded members that the modern task of sex education was a result of new trends which they could not change:

Children understand far more than we realise of what they hear and see, and absorb unconsciously more than they understand, reproducing both good and evil in unexpected fashion. There are for example parents who still object to their children being instructed in matters of sex, but the League of Nations report on the cinema gives the statement that though public opinion does not yet seem ready to accept scientific talks on biology and the origins of life, the film publicly represents the facts of life in a way which cannot but excite the imagination of the children and awaken their curiosity (*Mothers in Australia and New Zealand* 1932b).

Those who did not favour sex education, presumably did not trust young people to take responsibility for their sexuality either. In Melbourne, the Women’s Vigilance Society of Prahran made the most extreme response to such concerns. Its 42 members organised themselves so that some of them were always on duty, “visiting picture shows, seeing the character of the entertainment provided, and reporting any incidents of misbehaviour among the boys and girls” (Commonwealth of Australia/ Bailey, 848–849, items 22711–22712). They were literally the prowlers in the darkened cinema trying with the beam of the flashlight to stave off the worst aspects of the modern world. They were, in effect, the ones who, in true vigilante tradition, favoured their own practical efforts more than seemingly distant legislative initiative.

The strategic response of the more mainstream organisations such as the WCTU, YWCA and the Mothers’ Union however, during the 1920s, tended to promote the process of censorship and veered away from heavily criticising the film industry. This was partly due, at least on the part of the Mothers’ Union, to a set of peculiar directives from the organisation in Britain which suggested

that their members redirect their criticism from local cinema owners to those involved in film production. This approach particularly weakened local Australian organisations whose distance from production studios in Britain and America reduced their ability to directly pressure producers. Their counterparts in Britain also found the process ineffective when they were told, by film makers in Britain, that their demands were “unhelpful” and that a more “practical” stance would be not to “black-list” films, but to “white-list” the ones of which they approved (*Mothers In Australia* 1932a, 19). As a result, by the early 1930s, women’s groups which had once vigorously opposed the “immorality” of the film industry could instead be found recommending films to their members. As the Depression deepened, the Mothers’ Union urged followers not to show their protest by walking out of “immoral” films, as that would be too expensive a protest for most women, but instead to “applaud” the sections which they thought most appropriate (*Church of England Messenger*, 1934). Such moves were increasingly represented by the organisation not only as financially expedient but as progressive. They encouraged their members to position themselves as part of the film-going public and to adopt the less combative strategies of forming film “discussion” groups and writing film reviews in order to maintain a degree of moral sensitivity in the community with regard to cinema (*Mothers in Australia*, 1933).

It is hard to ascertain how many women took up such suggestions. Compared to the strategies which members of the WCTU, YWCA and the Mothers’ Union had employed in earlier campaigns, which had led women to push their demands for better regulation of the cinema industry into the public and political sphere, the idea of discussion groups and film reviewing was far less demanding. But it was also far less powerful: it reduced the response of concerned members to the level of personal preference or predilection about what should or should not be included in films. Furthermore such strategies removed the sense of moral authority, or even moral responsibility, from the women’s engagement with the complex, gendered terrain of the cinema. Where once they had felt themselves to be the sole agents who were willing to look after the needs of children and to protect them from the onslaught of the modern world, they were now encouraged to see both the (regulated) film industry and their consumption of films as the appropriate position for modern Christian mothers.

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NOTES

- ¹ Mrs Booth's limelight lecture, "The Slums of the Great Cities" which was on in the same year as *The Stations of the Cross*, was extremely popular and drew audiences around Australia on its quite extensive tour in 1900–1901. See for instance the line-up in Queensland in *the War Cry* 12 Jan 1901, p.15.
- ² For example Charles Smith Hurd, the Lumières' representative in America, put on a passion play in 1896 in Boston and Philadelphia which included filmed scenes, lantern slides, music and a lecture. A second version, by Richard Hollaman, was put on at the Musée Theatre in the same year, in which twenty-three separate films were shown and were sold to others who could add their own music, lantern slides or lectures. By 1900 commercial catalogues, such as McAllister's listed such films for sale. See David Robinson. 1996. *From Peep Show to Palace: The Birth of American Film*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- ³ They went on to argue "If Canada, Australia, and New Zealand all worked in coordination to obtain good films, the producers in America would be forced to give what was wanted". In "Improvement of Films: Proposals by Mothers: Bad Effect of 'Problem' Pictures", *Argus*, June 1921.

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