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The Better Films Movement and the Very Notion of It

Years ago, before the moment in which it seemed suddenly necessary for screen studies scholars to side with either history or theory, Judith Mayne called for closer examination of the formation of community identity through film spectatorship, on the observation that "[t]he relationship between specific social groups and how they identify themselves as participants in the public sphere of the cinema offers the opportunity to examine how cinema played a crucial role in the very notion of community."¹ The spirit of this call has not completely been ignored, and one might even say that the work in this very journal is evidence of the kind of interrogation Mayne sought to inspire. Over roughly the past decade and a half, film exhibition studies scholars have been steadily shifting attention away from the study of screen personalities and structures internal to the historical film industry and towards the more outward-facing discourses of entertainment culture. It is a trend that has, in certain ways, responded to Mayne's invitation, following through on it by revealing hidden aspects of community-building, if not always endeavoring to theorize the ideological stakes of community discourse. In order to study film culture's affirmative iterations of "the very notion of community," most have turned to materialist and close-textual analyses, profiting mightily from the historical evidence

that endures through news items, press released-based announcements, trade articles, and publications catering to the appetites of movie fans.

My part in following Mayne's provocative call has been to study the configuration of women's enfranchisement in the cultural tastemaking waves of the early twentieth century, especially where civic and community groups in the United States had been called upon to participate in the public characterization of motion pictures' social and aesthetic value. This broadly cultural engagement, promulgating the idea of film's inherent value in linking the local to the national, extolled the commercially viable combination of edification and entertainment on screens. It was not a grassroots idea, nor did it originate as an organ of industry policy similar to the Production Code Administration—though the roster of participants in and publications supporting both censorship laws and industry self-regulation overlapped and blurred in sometimes confusing ways.

The promotion of "better" films as a community-protecting project was first popularized by The National Board of Censorship, designed specifically with women's groups in mind. The better films *movement*, as it would be called, encouraged public awareness of motion picture programming via a variety of volunteer organizations and the vast social networks of women's clubs.² The fervent uptake of this interest area within powerful women's organizations was evidence of the entrepreneurial attitude with respect to mass culture that extended club activities beyond the social uplift framework of reform. Moreover, this "movie" movement found significant

institutional stability in spaces newly oriented to motion picture use. Better films - the very notion, as it were - took shape also due to women's presence in the growth of civic government and para-governmental structures in the U.S., a far cry from the exhibition locations that figure in conventional understandings of film distribution networks. It is the clubwomen's collective and individual work, especially beyond the movie trade, that I have been endeavoring to describe, to try to better understand how, and to how great an extent, women's groups as a whole were entrusted to become what Mark Lynn Anderson calls "media experts" and, in turn, what Dana Polan calls "cultural mediators."³ In this article I offer a shortened account of the better films movement and present some of my findings regarding the mosaic of civic entrenchment that was the movement's broader urban and rural context. This being a feminist account of these activities, I spend the second section of the article describing the diminution and elision of this work from the film historical record.

Surely the idea of pressuring exhibitors to program local theaters with "better" movies predates any organized group activity. However difficult it is to locate the precise origin of the better films effort, in 1914 the National Board of Censorship initiated its first "film betterment" agenda by established a National Committee for Better Films within its offices soon afterward. Over the next three years, and in concert with its evolution into the National Board of Review, the organization would stake its claim as hub to a widespread Better Films Movement. From this moment on, the better

films idea continued to inform cooperative community enterprises that were sponsoring film-related activities and continued to well into the 1930s.

These activities, in tandem with what Richard Maltby pointedly called the "conscious ideological project" of the commercial film industry, were the progenitors of later cineastic film subcultures.⁴ It was by no means a "grassroots" movement—even to think of it as a "movement" stretches our usual conceptions of political pressure and collective activism. But because the better films leaders at the National Board of Review organized calls for the production and exhibition of improvements in film quality to meet the mores of middle-class "betterment" and education, and did so by coopting a hyper-localizing, community-based front via socially exclusive networks of women's clubs and charity organizations, its status claim as a movement is convincing. For motion picture producers and theater owners to alter their usual film programming strategies and accept the new better films idea wholesale, they needed to be convinced that they would not lose any of the market share they had so recently gained and still be able to corral and profit from an energetic and vociferous demand by a movie-mad public for films of all kinds. More importantly, for many women, the better films movement provided new opportunities for advanced positions in civic life.

Entering the official activities "cosmos" of the better films movement via a uniform documentary trail is impossible, either practically or from a theoretical standpoint. The movement of speakers through lecture circuits was as spatially dispersing as any intrastate film distribution or exhibition

map, and likely intermittent or at times completely interrupted. What began as a unifying missionary core around 1916 dispatched by the early 1930s into a complex network of information, with that information traveling via alliances that spanned larger and smaller clubs, built outward from eastern, mid-western, and western hubs in large urban areas to satellites that reached into suburban neighborhoods. Of course, a national geographical range does not correlate directly to the size of the membership rolls at any given time; participation no doubt waxed and waned with urgency and enthusiasm and other facets of club life. In addition, the Better Films Council of the National Board of Review sponsored public activities to groups with disparate interests and ideologically diverging affinities. A historian of spectatorship simply shouldn't expect to find a single inventory in which thoughts, beliefs, motivations and problems of film betterment might be studied in detail; in fact, given that the movement's national membership was ideologically incoherent, the conclusions would simply be inaccurate.

Likewise, the usual film-historical practice of looking for smoking gun-types of evidence in relation to a specific motion picture, say, a single piece of correspondence from Will Hays or a censorship document confirming pressure from religious leadership would also be ineffective for getting at broader movement patterns.⁵ The better films idea accumulates unevenly across the documentary history of a wide range of American organizations and local and state institutions in the 1920s like the forming of snowdrifts.

Even the headquarters of the General Federation of Women's Clubs in Washington, D.C. has no dedicated repository devoted to the better films cause, which is a stunning fact given the GFWC's centrality, leadership and commitment to the endeavor.⁶ Although we can point to examples of women working as better films advocates, personalities and leaders are not only atypical and extraordinary, but their published opinions and their organizational goals were almost certainly their own, offering little indication regarding how the better films ideal differed from area to area. It is, indeed, the *serialized* design of the better films movement that we should study if we want to discover the social significance of this media movement's intentional and ideologically incoherent incorporation of the discourse of civic participation at a popular level. But how to see it?

Although the National Board of Review was a key player in the shaping and supervision of film legislation throughout the 1920s, by 1927 the Board's outward-facing associations had moved away from the polarizing agenda of fighting commercial censorship. Taking up the mantle of cultural betterment, its revised cause was the endorsement of European art cinema and a celebration of the social value of educational films and their purportedly uncensorable programming.⁷ Hollywood's notorious celebrity scandals notwithstanding, the officious energies of the Board of Review's Better Films Committees and the Better Films Council and Department aimed to create viewer-empowering associations with socially acceptable choices in filmgoing and to downplay the controversial and

ongoing business of passing pictures. After nearly two decades of public controversy and the pre-exhibition, involuntary censorship of entertainment films by state and municipal authorities, the National Board of Review leadership and its committees shifted course in promotion of this new idea: that film as an expressive form would be made better and more profitable for its producers if the skills and techniques of film appreciation were taken up by a more widespread swath of the public.

The better films scheme as embraced by the exhibition industry—in capsule form—was that motion picture producers and theater exhibitors stood to profit from an increasingly specific demand for more films of moral and educational value, particularly of so-called quality films and works of nonfiction that would feed the discerning interests of audiences outside of the boundaries of evening-scheduled entertainments. Historian Andrea Friedman has argued that over the course of its maturation, beginning in the Nickelodeon era and lasting into pre-code Hollywood, complex negotiations with regard to the protection of so-called public interests and the advancement of unfettered commercial interests allowed the Board of Review to succeed in cleaving profit-oriented marketing to the better films ideal, all the while concealing and reconciling serious social and political differences by instituting “a language of democratic moral authority.”⁸ Opposed to any additional film censorship boards at the state or federal level, the interest group had negotiated this philosophy of ‘prior restraint’ by film producers with regard to the content of their pictures. In fulfillment

of classic liberal notions of free speech protection, applied alongside the fostering of an educated viewership, self-policing of films afforded the industry advantages of control even in a climate of legal and quasi-legal code enforcement.⁹

With this industry backdrop, then, the *notion* of better films was used to underwrite a sprawling, loosely-identified and mostly volunteer network of representatives of associations and local organizations from smaller urban and rural areas- and most of them were women. As I will argue in the remainder of this article, women's groups interest in main street film exhibition and films of educational merit served a dual purpose. Film betterment enabled women opportunities to enter professional, public influence. It also offered a fleeting connection to the mystical, ritualizing powers of the Hollywood-managerial class, a class that had really only recently negotiated arrangements with national institutions of cultural legitimacy and were still relatively open to women's professional entry. Women's groups, such as the Women's Christian Temperance Union most notoriously, have long been popularly associated with the viewpoint that movies were morally corrosive and dangerously mesmerizing.¹⁰ However, for the better films variant of anti-censorship activist, countering myths of spectacular dangers were well beyond any administrative power they themselves could reasonably achieve.

Political Socialization and Better Films Workers

The extreme argument of the anti-obscenity activists in the earliest days of nickelodeon theater film programming had been that the popularity of moviegoing posed a threat to their efforts to sanitize working-class amusements and their urban environments.¹¹ As Lee Grieveson has detailed in his study of the incipient public panic during the earliest days of commercial cinemagoing, American jurisprudence responded to the alarmist language about the spectator's susceptibility to psychological effects of the movies, in part, due to strong linkages of power that already existed between social welfare groups and the social scientists in North American intellectual institutions.¹² These alliances asserted that movies and movie theaters held the empirically-proven potential to wreak all sorts of havoc on American life and culture, from the corruption of the patriarchal social order and the destabilization of white authority, to the destruction of the masterpieces of literature and arts as traditional mechanisms of civility. To be sure, the well-documented censorship and film reform activities of this period reflect an influential and contentious set of societal demands placed upon motion picture producers. Film historians have tended to treat censorship and anti-censorship pressures as equally responsible for shaping the entrepreneurial paths for film exhibition and the trade as well as creating lasting representational models of cinematic expression. What continues to fascinate about the history of film reform is how film culture was understood to be a matter of government, how American notions of a

citizen's responsibilities to the nation were translated into the administration and management of motion picture viewing. The responsibilities of citizenship, after all, occupy a broader range than the constitutional definition of a citizen's rights, and could be applied ambiguously to the moviegoer as easily as they could to a film or the conditions in which that film was shown.

Beginning with the National Board of Review's inauguration of the National Committee for Better Films and the Committee on Children's Pictures and Programs, leaders from socially-interested groups worked together to establish a public welfare-tinged pro-filmgoing and quality film campaign.¹³ The Better Films National Council began as a loose coalition of elite members of clubs, professional and service organizations, and community leaders whose aims were no doubt different, but who had joined up in a primarily pro-business partnership in opposition to the extreme notion that the spaces of filmgoing were inherently damaging to community life, a view that they attributed to the "professional reformers" whose livelihood depended upon a false narrative of social purification. In practice it developed into a more amorphous educational discourse commanding nearly automatic cultural influence owing to the social stature of its affiliations; the better films idea came to name not merely an taste-making entity shrouded by a popular discourse, but a crucial opening in a sex-segregated public sphere that connected a very particular, gender-coded legacy of maternalism—one that was undergoing its own transformations via

opportunities afforded by a newly enfranchised electorate—to new opportunities for women in the management of mass media. While we might envision the work of the better films advocates as residing with the mostly male employees in the offices of the National Board of Review, in practice this idea of elevated filmgoing underwrote a sprawling, loosely-identified network of representatives of associations and local organizations from smaller urban and rural areas – and most of this volunteer base was female. Disagreements were common among Board membership, but common as well between the Board and the women whose opinions were sought for public pressure campaigning. Frances G. Courvares has written that although ideologically diverse across several sociological categories, some of “such disagreements *sometimes* expressed themselves in terms of gender, with volunteer women on the ground-level censoring committees finding themselves overruled by the Board’s professional staff or the General Committee, both of which were composed almost entirely of men.”¹⁴ Perhaps Courvares has chosen language that diminishes the offensiveness of the sex-discriminatory evidence he examined, but many other film historians have also dismissed the better films movement as either the industry’s market-motivated response to the puritanical pro-censorship activities of religious groups and state censors, or a patronizing cooptation of the domestic feminist movement, of scalable popular appeals to women’s interests. The heterogeneity of this film discourse should suggest to us that the better films movement should at the very least be

credited for enabling a wider range of ideas resulting in a taste discourse more complex and exerting influence in several “directions.” At the very least, the better films movement should interest us for the ways in which it involved the simultaneous subjection and promotion of women.

In her important study of the anti-obscurity networks in New York, Andrea Friedman notes that the National Board of Review made strategic use of middle-class women's clubs by playing upon the ambiguities of “female moral authority.”¹⁵ The Committee for Better Films specifically sought out white clubwomen to use as public speakers and campaigners who could best combat the rising pro-censorship tide coming from within their ranks in the regional affiliates of the General Federation of Women's Clubs. The very real possibility that women's clubs could organize new powerful voting blocks in support of film censorship, coupled with the knowledge that many clubwomen were undecided on the issue, resulted in the formation of the National Committee for Better Films. In this system of pressure politics, the clubwomen who participated in national conversations about film programming would then be sent back to their neighborhood and city level meetings to convince other women of the importance of understanding motion pictures as protected speech and as legitimate cultural activities.¹⁶ What this means is that the cultural recoding of film as a commercially—and socially—profitable commodity at the highest levels of institutional and governmental operations relied upon networks of civic

volunteerism that had developed in the United States during the same years in which the cause of suffrage joined women in networks of activism.

As it evolved, the movement's tagline became "selection, not censorship." Utilizing community leaders already partial to filmgoing, better films would endeavor to convince its membership that selective viewing practices, a cineastic "film sense," would better serve to elevate the filmgoing audience while also improving the experience of hometown life. In short, the activities of the coordinating body of the Better Films Council could provide the public with the means – through its own practice of film appreciation, rather than legalized control of films and their exhibition – to inoculate itself against the thing in the movies that posing the presumed moral threat that caused religious leaders and anti-obscenity activists to worry. With this broad tastemaking agenda, the Better Films Council provided its perceived public with filtered information addressing women's concerns – by beginning with codifying guidelines for film appreciation and later on by creating lists of recommended films in current distribution. Their activities extended from the publication of lists of nontheatrical film distributors to the coordination of some of the first film courses for women. The better films' carefully annotated lists were circulated in magazine format (*Exceptional Photoplays*, *Film Progress*, and the *Monthly Photoplay Guide*; as well as *Ladies' Home Journal* and *Woman's Home Companion*), in club member bulletins, and to key professional journals like that of the American Library Association. Reaching the clubwoman audience via a

more traditional public sphere, this print component of better films fused a discourse of civic spectatorship with responsible film consumption. Perhaps no better example of this exists than the Better Films Service column which ran in the *Woman's Home Companion*.¹⁷

Hewing closely to the General Federation of Women's Clubs' formidable Americanization-laced community outreach programs and its civics-oriented initiatives encouraging political participation, the Better Films Service trumpeted citizenship themes in its lists of films; it did so using the signatures of female media expertise that would later be exploited by the Payne Fund and nontheatrical entities such as the Film Council of America and the Community Film Service Bureau. As Antonia Lant notes in her account in *Red Velvet Seat*, the Better Films Service sought to "involve the entire community, and trumpeted successful cooperation between women's clubs, theater management, chambers of commerce, religious groups, and service organizations from the Rotarians to the Boy Scouts."¹⁸ Connections of these kinds were the spine of the movement, evidence not only of the extended reach of the better films idea but also of its perceived value for the building of a responsible citizenship through the mechanism of a self-governance mimesis found in the membership structures of leagues, clubs, associations, societies, bureaus. Para-governmental bonding in membership groups has always been, as de Tocqueville observed in 1835, a quintessential expression of the American notion of citizenship, especially in their most exclusive, selective, and segregationist forms.¹⁹ In the pages of

its journal *Photoplay*, Janet Priest solicited wider club participation in better films initiatives, claiming that the welfare of a city extended beyond “clean streets, clean yards, and clean houses.” “Clean films are essential to the welfare of every community.”²⁰ The confluence of civic pride and a citizen’s responsibilities were articulated well by Priest, who, in 1918, founded The Better Photoplay League of America with Myra Kingman Miller, a feminist and then president of the National Federation of College Women.

The women who advanced within the professional outlet of film reform circuits, regardless of their political affinities, were drawn in as cultural narrators for a cultural discourse of arts consumption and media management. Think of the socially-encompassing scale of these better films networks and it is easier to imagine just who the principal advocates of the “selection-not-censorship” idea were. These people made space in their lives (and the lives of their families) to be present at meetings away from their work and families many times a year: white and economically-advantaged women at liberty to leave their hometowns, meeting halls, church basements, ladies' auxiliaries, libraries, and classrooms across the United States, individuals who were already actively engaged in their local civic organizations, either professionally or through volunteer activities that interested them, and whose interests were fueled by a broader commitment to the new social science-driven idea of social betterment. The trade and popular press coverage, and even the Board itself, held the actively-involved membership in a negative light, often incorporating their opinions in a

mocking fashion, according to the unflattering and desexualized stereotype of the nonprofessional “busybody”-matron, whose sole concern was the containment and shaping of social life according to vaguely or directly religious discourses of sobriety and decency. In popular caricatures and serious descriptions alike, the voice of the Board was feminized by its associations with a maternalist politics that inscribed womanhood with child-rearing and the familial duties of responsible parenting; even and still, the organization was male-dominated at the top from the beginning and well into the 1920s. It is not possible to offer a precise accounting of how many individual women, paid or volunteer, flooded the public service realm in this period. This holds true for the number of women who performed outreach work for the Board of Review as part of service to their communities holding better movie meetings for their local clubs, churches, and charity leagues.

In other ways, the Board's appeal to women's club members as the go-between for film exhibitors and distributors at the neighborhood level also stands in striking opposition to the other principal way that women audiences were being defined at the time. The common contemporary portrayal of the female spectator exaggerated her bad habits of spectatorship and susceptibility to generic manipulation. Women's sensational isolation from the motion picture apparatus and simultaneously vulnerability has indicated to feminist film theorists the extent to which women, cast as “experiencing subjects” by the institution of cinema in these

transitional years of its development, turned on what Miriam Hansen characterized as women's "notorious overidentification with the image."²¹ The archival evidence that the better films movement left behind in a variety of nontheatrical contexts presents a different image: that of educated, professional women working to reform -- to re-frame -- film culture and in ways that throw into relief the popular notion of narcissistic "movie-struck" or "star-struck" girls.²² It is this dialectic that will allow us to understand how the logic and context of better film-styled exhibition practices elevated and exploited women's cultural work at the site of several key benevolent institutions.²³ If the women's clubs' participation in the better films movement can be thought of as an "imaginative strategy" of resistance, what remains to be explored is the degree to which such strategies were contained entirely by censorship politics.

Coming to Terms: Better Films in Film History

The historical intersections between women's organizations and the Board should not be taken as a sign that all political or social differences between them had been set aside, and particularly not when it came to matters of gender equality; Frances G. Couvares takes note of the special circumstances in the introduction to his book, *Movie Censorship and American Culture*, when he points out that civic participation by women in the arena of screen regulation was deeply conflicted, a simultaneous instance of women's "subordination" and their recently acquired cultural

empowerment.²⁴ In some of the more authoritative accounts of the better films movement written by prominent historians of American film culture, structural alliances between the Board and women's groups are little more than distillations of pervasive and pernicious ideological stereotypes; organizations whose achievements included fundamental changes in labor, education, health care, recreation, and even traffic regulation are presented as uniformly anti-obscurity, even when speaking in unison with the Board's anti-censorship agenda. While written as a doctoral dissertation, Charles Matthew Feldman's *The National Board of Censorship (Review) of Motion Pictures, 1909-1922* (1977) offers us a case in point. Following the accepted methodology for film history at the time of its writing, Feldman draws evidence from primary documents and trade press accounts in order to trace the censorship goals of the Board and, in so doing, incorporates selective statements by pro-censorship partisans leaving the impression that women's clubs exercised a uniform opposition to the Board. Though he concludes his account with the moment of the Board's shifting of emphasis towards the production and exhibition of better films (an initiative in fact, largely staffed by club members), he claims that a separation (one he calls it a "divorce") between the Board and the General Federation of Women's Clubs in 1918 ended the federated clubs' participation in the activities of the Board. Feldman's treatment is agnostic, it would seem, on the matter of gender; yet his references to the agents of the debate as "women" and "club

women” suggests that sexual difference was a meaningful identificatory aspect of the agonists of only one side.

Garth Jowett’s classic study, *Film: The Democratic Art* (1976), which was published at the height of the American women’s movement, pays more careful attention to the interconnectedness between a burgeoning gender equality consciousness and the social, political, and economic regulation of screen entertainments. Social history that it is, and in ways distinct from Robert Sklar’s cultural history of film, *Movie-Made America* (1975), published the year before, Jowett’s project is propelled by questions surrounding the nature of American attitudes towards newly introduced mass media and the acceptance or rejection of film.²⁵ Flashes of the ordinary, everyday life of the cinema are brilliantly depicted through Jowett’s interweaving of correspondence, public commentary, and a scrupulous use of trade discourse. In this manner, the project sought to link the discipline of film studies more directly to the study of popular culture and American studies. The work is indebted to contemporary thought about the broader mass media, particularly as represented by Marshall McLuhan and Harold Innis. Jowett’s new social history maps American responses to film during periods of social upheaval, economic change, and transformational politics, locating the fact-based instantiations of social responses on pages of news and entertainment publications and seeing their inscriptions in broad institutional trends and shifts. This expansive notion of the public spheres of cinema, coupled with a broadly construed

definition of “community” as the central measurement of whether a media form is accepted or rejected, comes from Jowett’s reliance on mediated statements that circulated in print form and provide context, both qualitative and quantitative: popular periodicals, scholarly publications, government documents, box-office data and other non-film texts. As the historical ground of Jowett’s unifying interpretive schema, these press and trade publications, personal correspondence, and bureaucratic records become significant “nodal points” of the analysis, providing the factual horizons of what can and can’t be stated or taken as a historical statement about cinema at that moment.

If one of Jowett’s unifying frames of reference could be said to be the notion of “social fabric” he employed, then the political agency of female better films advocates active within this context is also inflected stereotypically by the types of historical evidence provided. In describing the operations of the Hays Office, Jowett’s aperture is narrowed significantly by the limiting of sources to the official discourse on film regulation produced either by the Board itself or to film-historical surveys which themselves have a legal and moral orientation with regard to motion pictures. In the sole passage about women’s organizations, he incorporates into his description of this “social fabric” an understanding of the coalition networks of unpaid volunteer workers, a nuance that is absent from most historical analyses of women’s groups’ participation in the public discussion of film regulation. On the other hand, Jowett concludes this brief section

with a quotation from historian William O'Neill's book *Everyone Was Brave: The Rise and Fall of Feminism* (1969). By O'Neill's account, the decade following the First World War was one in which "clubwomen ceaselessly investigated and inveighed against the movie industry."²⁶ Jowett does not include this generalization in order to challenge it, although the documentary history he surveyed might have told a different story. Instead he closes by re-inscribing a confusing dual image of woman as simultaneously both controller of the media and passive consumer:

"[w]omen did indeed play a major role in shaping the content of American films, both by favoring certain themes in their role as individual customers at the box office, and through the official influence of women's organizations as guardians of the public morality."²⁷ *Women did indeed play a role.* The mode of historical explanation at work here which avers that 'favoring certain themes' influences of "the content" of films, aside from being naïve about the power of the customer and ignoring the many directors, editors, and other female film workers whose labor tangibly altered the screen fare of that period, perpetuates the notion that women's "sex roles" are limited to forms of power legible as maternal or spectatorial. More to the point, however, as a historical description, "[w]omen did indeed play a major role," falls well short of meaningfully connecting the activities of reformers, regulators, industry leaders, and the moving-going public, to the political system that defines their relations. As Nancy Rosenbloom has already pointed out in her article, "Between Reform and Regulation," which

still remains one of the most detailed and nuanced accounts of the politicization of the anti-censorship lobby in Washington, assertions about progressive reformers demands can obscure the thornier problems of political agreement.²⁸

The way that film historian Richard Koszarski writes about the Better Films Movement in *An Evening's Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture, 1915-1928* could be another case in point. His book, which places importance on describing conditions of exhibition, the experience of filmgoing, and on providing industry context for filmmakers and the burgeoning star culture of the period, employs a methodology comparatively more open to the idea that 'modes of involvement' peculiar to suffrage-era and post-suffrage American clubwomen were integral to the process of wedding civic responsibility to newly emerging habits of spectatorship. Koszarski's account assigns influence to the leaders of the better films movement, and his inclusion of this cultural activity in the context of film regulation underscores the centrality of its organized initiatives to the identity of the Board of Review (that is, as opposed to viewing it as a supplementary and politically empty venture). It is on the basis of his account, which presents the better films agenda as a cornerstone of the work of the Board of Censorship through its National Committee for Better Films, which we can begin to trace the broader outlines of nebulous cultural activity. Koszarski's presentation attributes to better films initiatives the central, coalescing mission of all Board activities

immediately after the post-censorship reorganization of that group.²⁹

“Across the country, various community groups fostered the better films idea on a local level. Some of these were formed independently, others were instigated directly by the National Board.”³⁰ By his account, the organizational mechanisms that made better films into a feature of filmgoing around the country, from afternoon matinees to the magazine promotion of good taste via *Exceptional Photoplays*, did so by asserting influence more broadly and more culturally distinctive than simply a neo-censorship front for the industry’s anti-regulation interests. Noting that the effects of the better films agenda were widespread across all academic levels of film curricula and localizable to a plurality of emergent exhibition practices, Koszarski makes the important observation that the better films movement’s message, if not its labor and publicity committee ephemera, occupied a primary role in American film stewardship and could be credited with forming the first undisciplined branches of film study in North America. His account retraces the emergence of the movement back to local film viewing clubs such as Cleveland’s Cinema Club and follows that influence beyond the censoring habitus through to a growing interest in art cinema and small-scale film venues (“Little Photoplay Theater” concept), Hugo Münsterberg, Vachel Lindsay, Seymour Stern, Gilbert Seldes, and finally Robert Sherwood’s publications of film industry yearbooks.

Koszarski’s account makes very clear that he thinks the “era of preparation”

for “serious film study” took place because of the Better Films Movement and in sites that the industry did not directly make a financial profit from.³¹

This thoroughness makes it altogether more puzzling that the coordinates for Koszarski’s account are set by documents and publications that themselves narrow the perspective of the Board’s activities and fall sway to the ideological notion of maternalist cultural housekeeping; in particular, the criticism of the Board’s relationship with a wide array of organizations identified with vastly different agendas is left unchallenged in his account. “Certain critics of censorship were not happy about this ‘woman’s club’ aspect of the Board, which they saw as coming under the sway of the Daughters of the American Revolution, the International Federation of Catholic Alumnae, the Parent-Teacher Association, and the General Federation of Women’s Clubs. ‘The biggest woman’s club machine in the country’ is how Ernst and Morris characterized the Board in this period, suggesting that the social and political agenda of these groups might be used to channel and control the media.”³²

The supposed gender-based threat to entertainment cinema will continue to be unquestioningly repeated as a part of received film history unless we can incorporate constitutional and systemic differences into the treatment of “free” motion pictures.

There is no reason to doubt that the large federation of American women’s clubs constituted a powerful presence and that, as such, the General Federation of Women’s Clubs was strategically useful for the MPPDA and its

campaigning against morality panics and state censorship. However, the increasing numbers of middle-class women participating in their communities and in national associations and social clubs must be understood first as an outgrowth of women's well-documented exclusion from politics starting in the nineteenth century; and subsequently, as the systematic exemption of their collective or individual activity in matters of social organization and politics as they began to be admitted to decision-making processes. As Theda Skocpol concludes in her masterful study *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States*, one notable irony about this dramatically active period of progressive reform is that the nation did not have "strong, autonomous public bureaucracies" and women's groups thus legitimately claimed to be the most powerful force for change in the country.³³ American women's clubs of the Progressive Era had exercised leadership in matters ranging from public health and education to legislative and judicial reform. And as Wendy Sharer argues convincingly with regard to the organizing strategies of the League of Women Voters at the time, the critical counter-discourse that circulated in print form was shaped by the increase in women's literacy rates. Developing by means of print publication that were in some ways disconnected from the readership of the national newspapers and magazines, an ability to write and read underscored the oppositional "sisterhood" on an emerging national-scale in which spheres of women's citizenship depended upon the circulation of ephemeral club and society

publications like newsletters, postcard campaigning, monthly reports and leaflets.³⁴

Whereas women's roles as participants in the leadership of the better films movement has been narrowly perceived as guided by "women's moral concerns," the constellation of issues represented by the types of activities that the broader better films movement advocated for (children's matinees, library film screenings, educational film production, improvements in musical accompaniment, tie-ins of screenings with charity events, to name a few) exceed the narrow frame of film regulation and indicate a network of tactical processes. To refer to film reformers *en masse* as a largely female and thus feminized social body is a generalization still widely regarded as accurate. Acceptance of this image significantly muddies the historical waters. Even if the organizations' representatives in the film reform movement had been drawn from institutions or assemblies that systematically excluded women, community members of color, or the foreign born from the leadership ranks, the impression we are often left with is that this *interest* was representatively female; that the supposedly self-appointed army of uplifters who occupied this social-caregiving service role were essentially feminine by nature of their work. With little discrimination between the umbrella groups and the charter organizations, between leadership and membership, the capitalized banner of "Women's Clubs" has been used by film historians to point to conglomerations of (busybody) volunteer service groups hostile to the film industry and, more

importantly, unfriendly to the distribution and exhibition systems upon which the studios relied. To be sure, many who joined in the conversation about film reform were women from backgrounds of privilege and were practicing an outdated notion of *noblesse oblige*—a more neutral casting of clubwomen as those who “had designated themselves as parentally in charge of a nation’s culture” (as Richard Maltby offers) is a characterization moving in this direction.³⁵ But not all women’s clubs represented in the General Federation of Women’s Clubs were charity work organizations and engaging in the enterprises of community service.

Like their female counterparts in other benevolent societies and religious groups, whose entry into pressure politics required acquiescing to the idea that women’s work be aimed at the greater good conceived of as an extension of the home, women speaking on behalf of the better films agenda exploited cinematic housekeeping ideals that had already established film custodianship as part of an oversimplified “women’s purview.” Using what Wendy B. Sharer has called the “ethos-building strategy” of female activism in this period, participants in the better films movement embraced the Dewey-esque notion of education in the community that required teaching media literacy, propagating the notion of cinema as equal to other arts, and engaging film exhibition spaces for educational activities that could be viewed as uplifting of the civic realm. The denial that such work was political, that it was moral, allows us to grasp the paradox that American women’s groups found themselves facing, should they have wanted to assert

their influence at the national level. They were both subservient to such ideals and also in a unique position to facilitate the film education priorities represented by the better films movement. Because other national issue-based women's groups had already worked their way into the lobbying circuits of elite male politicians, the better films advocates could more deftly participate in agencies which represented their interests, even if those groups had little to do with community regulation or promotion.

This form of political passing was tolerated and even promoted because women's groups' political voices were not universally recognized and the unauthorized paths to negotiation were established as part of the tacit acknowledgement of a gender-based responsibility to protect public welfare.³⁶ Skocpol reminds us of the paradoxical conditions existing in the decade following the federal legislation establishing women's electoral enfranchisement, in which the members of women's organizations and their leaders operated in favorable bureaucratic and legislative conditions, experiencing greater public visibility than ever, though still largely denied access to high-level decision-making posts. Moreover, if the demands coming from women were framed as "women's moral concerns, and not [as] matters [impugning] institutional male self-interest," they were persuasive to politicians and leaders. Legislators approved broadly of aiding children and mothers. Family-related needs that did not directly reduce the power of labor, compete with entrepreneurial or commercial interests, or interfere with traditional politics were "a good fit." Underscoring certain advantages

of a maternalist agenda, Skocpol observes that “[w]omen’s political agitation was well suited to overcoming the structural obstacles that the early-twentieth-century U.S. polity placed in the way of advocates of the new social policies.”³⁷ This observation further suggests that political and social advancements of the better films advocates and their causes were tied crucially to women’s second-class status as citizens, to their exclusion to the role of witnesses to action and simultaneous observers in culture and civic matters more broadly.

In other words, the better films movement proponents' status as cultural spectators was perhaps as meaningful in political spheres as it was in the spheres of publicity around cinema and film spectatorship, and the identity of their membership within this community was shot through with dynamics peculiar to filmgoing. And that returns me to the observation with which I opened this article, the one in which Judith Mayne offered a suggestion as to where spectatorship studies might begin to better see community identity: “[t]he relationship between specific social groups and how they identify themselves as participants in the public sphere of the cinema offers the opportunity to examine how cinema played a crucial role in the very notion of community.”³⁸ That sentence is not simple to paraphrase, because her idea turns on seeking and being able to study a “notion”—the ultimate expression of which is to be found within the linkages between groups and their own self-imagining *as participants*. Participation is not so much at issue as is, in other words, the perception of active

participation; whether a false perception or an intention, the object of study is the contours of this abstraction. Mayne's immediate concern was the evaluation of the public sphere of cinema within historical studies of spectatorship, an area that she can be credited with helping to found, especially where studies of immigrant spectatorship is concerned. For this reason, it is all the more significant that Mayne recommended that we become attuned to consideration of "a very notion," since in doing so, we would then ask where we need to be looking-in which archival collections, at what publications, at which films-in order to see notional historical evidence. I have concluded that the betterment of film offers us a notion, and maybe nothing more. But as a notion, it is a useful frame for understanding cohesive structures of belonging (and non-belonging) where civic life and the cinema are concerned, and which tell us what role that cinema offers for "the very notion of community."³⁹ Indeed, what more ephemeral object can there be than the notion of betterment of a community? And if we are seeking to examine the discursive history of something so aspirational as social improvement, do the forces for cinematic betterment reflect the desire for community betterment in ways that hold new meaning now?

1 Judith Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1993), 67.

2 The all-capitalization of Better Films or Better Films Movement in this article reflects an attempt to distinguish between the officially taken monikers and the more general spreading of the idea of film betterment. That the distinction itself is murky is part of the argument of this article. However, if a person, organization, or publication uses capital letters, I have tried to avoid confusion by doing the same in reference to its usage there.

3 See Mark Lynn Anderson, "Taking Liberties: The Payne Fund Studies and the Creation of the Media Expert," in *Inventing Film Studies*, eds. Lee Grieveson and Haidee Wasson (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 38-65; and Dana Polan, *Scenes of Instruction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 303.

4 In his article, "'To Prevent the Prevalent Type of Book': Censorship and Adaptation in Hollywood, 1924-1934," Maltby situated studios' "prior restraint" as one aspect of a negotiated culture of consumption, a position, as he puts in, "in which the industry found itself as a purveyor of fictions for mass consumption." Richard Maltby, "'To Prevent the Prevalent Type of Book': Censorship and Adaptation in Hollywood, 1924-1934," in *Movie Censorship and American Culture*, ed. Francis G. Couvares (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), 97-128.

5 On the limitations of such film historiography, see Charles Acland's assessment of why the analysis of screen culture cannot follow from a theory of film beholden to the idea of the "discreteness of the cinema." See especially "The Practice of Cinemagoing," in Charles R. Acland, *Screen Traffic: Movies, Multiplexes, and Global Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003). Several observations in that chapter, though it addresses more recent formations of screen culture, pertain, including the central insight that cinemagoing as a cultural practice is broader than merely film viewing.

6 The General Federation of Women's Clubs archives in Washington, D.C. holds extensive records and troves of material related to many causes taken up by club members. When I conducted my research there, the organization of the GFWC's textual records did not include the better films movement as a collection subject heading.

7 The regulation of educational film exhibition in the U.S. has not been nearly as thoroughly commented upon as that of entertainment film and yet the intentions surrounding regulation are as inextricable as they are different. Perhaps the most widely publicized case of a banned sponsored film was *The Birth of a Baby* (1937), and while certainly a landmark case of control of maternal health films and a magazine publication of stills, is best considered part of a later phase of controversy around film betterment. On *Birth of a Baby* see Laura Wittern-Keller, *Freedom of the Screen: Legal Challenges to State Film Censorship, 1915-1981* (Lexington, Ky: University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 82-88.

8 Andrea Friedman, *Prurient Interests: Gender, Democracy, and Obscenity in New York City, 1909-1945*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 33. See especially chapters 1 and 5.

9 Along with Andrea Friedman's *Prurient Interests*, the following accounts of the formation of U.S. motion picture regulation and the local negotiations over industrial self-policing of controversial film subjects are considered indispensable scholarship regarding the National Board of Review: Nancy J. Rosenbloom's "Between Reform and Regulation: The Struggle over Film

Censorship in Progressive America, 1909-1922," in *Movie Censorship and American Culture*; Daniel Czitrom, "The Redemption of Leisure: The National Board of Censorship and the Rise of Motion Pictures in New York City, 1900-1920" *Studies in Visual Communication* 10:4 (1984): 2-6; Ruth A. Inglis, *Freedom of the Movies: A Report on Self-Regulation from the Commission on Freedom of the Press* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1947); and Lee Grieveson's *Policing Cinema: Movies and Censorship in Early Twentieth-Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

10 See Alison M. Parker, "Mothering the Movies: Women Reformers and Popular Culture," in *Movie Censorship and American Culture* and Anne Morey's *Hollywood Outsiders: The Adaptation of the Film Industry* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

11 Friedman, 25-61.

12 This insight is offered in multiple places throughout Lee Grieveson's *Policing Cinema*. See especially chapter two, "Scandalous Cinema, 1906-1907."

13 It is worth noting here that the documents related to the Children's Pictures Committee within the National Board of Review of Motion Pictures collection at The New York Public Library (in the Manuscript and Archives Division) are dispersed across various watchdog formations such as the National Committee on Films for Young People, the Schools' Motion Picture Committee, and the Junior Matinee papers within the papers of the National Committee for Better Films. For more on these groups see Richard DeCordova, "'Ethnography and Exhibition: The Child Audience, the Hays Office and Saturday Matinees,'" *Camera Obscura* 23 (1990): 91-107.

14 Francis G. Courvares, "Hollywood, Main Street, and the Church: Trying to Censor the Movies Before the Production Code," 129-158.

15 Friedman, 167.

16 Friedman, 161.

17 Antonia Lant and Ingrid Periz, eds., *The Red Velvet Seat: Women's Writing on the First Fifty Years of Cinema* (New York and London: Verso, 2006), 271.

18 *Ibid.*, 271 and n.177 p. 772.

19 Referring here to *Democracy in America*.

20 See Lant and Periz, 272 and n. 177, p.772.

21 Miriam Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film* (Cambridge, Ma: Harvard University Press, 1991), 124.

22 See Shelley Stamp, *Movie-Struck Girls: Women and Motion Picture Culture after the Nickelodeon* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

23 In *Babel and Babylon*, Miriam Hansen cites women's clubs' involvement in "film-cultural activities" as one of the myriad ways "women not only experienced the misfit of the female spectator in relation to patriarchal positions of subjectivity but also developed imaginative strategies in response to it" (125).

24 Frances G. Couvares, "Introduction," in *Movie Censorship and American Culture*, 8.

25 Though worthwhile, it would be too much of a digression here to compare *Movie-Made America* and *Film: The Democratic Art*. These two works have occupied a similar place in the evidential construction of film history. Each project is distinctive in method and objectives, yet issued from a singular moment in North American film studies.

26 Garth Jowett, *Film: The Democratic Art* (Boston: Focal Press, 1976), 180.

27 Jowett, 180.

- 28 Nancy J. Rosenbloom, "Between Reform and Regulation," 309.
- 29 See Richard Koszarski, *An Evening's Entertainment: The Age of the Silent Feature Picture, 1915-1928* (New York: Scribner, 1990) 208-210.
- 30 Koszarski, 208.
- 31 Koszarski, 209-210.
- 32 Koszarski, 208.
- 33 Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1992), 372.
- 34 Wendy B. Sharer, *Vote and Voice: Women's Organizations and Political Literacy, 1915-1930* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004), 109.
- 35 The context of Richard Maltby's description is from a reference to the speeches of Will Hays and the industry's antagonistic relationship to heterogeneous groups, there glossed, correctly, as "civic and religious groups." See Richard Maltby, "'To Prevent the Prevalent Type of Book': Censorship and Adaptation."
- 36 Skocpol, 372.
- 37 Skocpol, 372.
- 38 Judith Mayne, 67.
- 39 Judith Mayne, 67.