
by David M. Lugowski

Queer representation was common in American cinema during the Great Depression, and the records of Hollywood’s Production Code Administration prove that those images were read as such at the time. Queerness was criticized because it refracted traditional masculinity imperiled by the socioeconomic crisis, yet it was essential as entertainment and ideological prop.

Gender Reversals, Queerness, and a Nation in Crisis. An extraordinary scene takes place near the beginning of The Strange Love of Molly Louvain, a typically punchy Warner Bros. melodrama directed by studio ace Michael Curtiz in 1932. A small-time confidence trickster and his cronies are sitting inside a hotel lobby, staring out a picture window, betting on whether the next person passing outside will be a man or a woman. The con man is on a winning streak, but when a man passing by tips his cigarette in a看似ingly flouncy manner, the gang pauses for a beat, uncertain as to which among them won the bet, before one says, “It’s a man!” They try again; this time it’s a woman, but the con protests what appears to be his loss: “No, women in pants don’t count.”

This scene summarizes much of this article. As cinema learned to talk, so did it also “speak” about the gender roles so crucial to Hollywood film. Far from giving viewers a “[picture] window on reality,” films from the early sound period often seem to “frame” their highly theatrical, performed nature. As with the betting game, these films came under close scrutiny by producers and audiences alike, the former seemingly “shooting the works” in terms of titillating, “dangerous” content on their every try, the latter less able to play the game with so little pocket change to spare. In the darkest days of the Great Depression, a great deal was at stake, as every successful man felt that his winning streak could end at any moment. Many of U.S. society’s gender roles were out in the open, if only “in passing,” with “women in pants” and effeminate men questioning and threatening the domain of the male breadwinner in the aftermath of the Great Crash, a moment of “lost bets.”

Much has been written about how, as Robert McElvaine has argued, “the Depression can be seen as having effected a ‘feminization’ of American society. The self-centered, aggressive, competitive ‘male’ ethic of the 1920s was discredited. Men who lost their jobs became dependent in ways that women had been

David M. Lugowski is a doctoral candidate in cinema studies at New York University. He teaches at NYU’s Center for Advanced Digital Applications and at the College of Staten Island/CUNY. An earlier version of this article won third place in the 1995 SCS student writing competition.

© 1999 by the University of Texas Press, P.O. Box 7819, Austin, TX 78713-7819

Cinema Journal 38, No. 2, Winter 1999 3
thought to be.” More women, both married and single, had entered the workforce in the years before the Depression than ever before, while, at the same time, women were in some ways less affected by the Depression insofar as the domain to which patriarchy had traditionally assigned them—the home—remained theirs ideologically, if not always literally. In fact, the domestic sphere needed their strength more than ever before. And the cinema of the era, unlike today’s, whose most powerful audience is young men aged sixteen to twenty-four, was patronized to a much larger extent by adult women. Meanwhile, men’s status as breadwinners faced such economic hardships as 25 percent unemployment. As characterized by recent feminist critics, men also experienced a shift through the 1920s and 1930s from a “manly” production social ethic to a “feminized” consumerism. In short, men found their gender status, linked to notions of “work” and “value” promulgated by capitalist structures and ideologies, in jeopardy. Indeed, even their newer status as consumers was threatened. Men who had internalized the American Dream and its success myth—men who had equated their manhood with material gain and their ability to be providers for their families—were now wondering about the feasibility of the U.S. capitalist enterprise. On a more personal level, they wondered about themselves as well. As Margaret McFadden writes, men “experienced their inability to provide adequate family support as a failure of masculinity.”

Suddenly, queer imagery in film, typically in the form of comical representations of gay men, lesbians, and ambiguous sexuality, did not seem so funny anymore, least of all to those charged with applying Hollywood’s Production Code to film content. By “queer” imagery, I am focusing particularly on situations, lines of dialogue, and characters that represent behavior coded, according to widely accepted stereotypes, as cross-gendered in nature. As played by such prominent and well-established supporting comedy character actors as Franklin Pangborn, Edward Everett Horton, Grady Sutton, Erik Rhodes, Eric Blore, and Ernest Truex, queer men tended to appear as one of two types. The queer in his more subdued form appears as the dithering, asexual “sissy,” sometimes befuddled, incompetent, and, if married, very henpecked (Horton), and sometimes fussy and officious (Pangborn). Pangborn, however, was one of the actors who (along with the unsung likes of Tyrell Davis and Tyler Brooke) also played or suggested the other type, the more outrageous “pansy,” an extremely effeminate boulevardier type sporting lipstick, rouge, a trim mustache and hairstyle, and an equally trim suit, incomplete without a boutonniere.

Although a number of actors played or were even typecast in such roles, one generally doesn’t find a circle of prominent supporting actresses whose personas seemed designed to connote lesbianism (the closest, perhaps, is Cecil Cunningham). Nonetheless, as we shall see, lesbian representation occurs frequently as well, and in perhaps a greater range of gradations. At her most overt, the lesbian was clad in a mannishly tailored suit (often a tuxedo), her hair slicked back or cut in a short bob. She sometimes sported a monocle and cigarette holder (or cigar!) and invariably possessed a deep alto voice and a haughty, aggressive attitude toward men, work, or any business at hand. Objections arose because she seemed to usurp male privilege; perhaps the pansy seemed to give it up.

4 Cinema Journal 38, No. 2, Winter 1999
If we need historical proof that, for example, the effeminate pansy was widely known as a homosexual for the 1930s spectator, George Chauncey’s social history, *Gay New York*, demonstrates not only the conflation of the then-new category of sexual orientation with long-standing ideas about gender performance but also just how visible the pansy was in the early decades of twentieth-century America. Given that a man’s masculinity was not impugned as long as he maintained the “active” position sexually, rouged but not always cross-dressing fairy prostitutes did a surprisingly lively and varied business. The gay male culture of the bathhouses thrived, and hotels, rooming houses, and other spaces of urban transition were open and free for brief sexual encounters and even alternative romantic relationships. The “New Woman,” meanwhile, included lesbians who found emotional, cultural, and political opportunities in expanded same-sex worlds of work and education, in settlement houses, and in feminist activism. Discourses about “intermediate” and “third” sexes became widely dispersed early in the century, while disregard for many values and institutions was brought about by the upheavals of urbanization and World War I. The post–World War I era, a key period in identity politics in U.S. culture, with its disillusioned veterans, feminist struggles, racial and ethnic migrations, shifts and tensions, and widespread contempt for Prohibition, was often enabling for queerness. Queer fire accrued to the “flaming youth” culture of the Jazz Age. Vaudeville and burlesque, steeped in humor about the body, were virtual fairgrounds for the display of gender roles, and Broadway first began to feature lesbian and gay characters in the 1920s. These trends continued into the Depression years, with nightclub “pansy” acts all the rage in New York in 1930–31 and in Los Angeles in 1932–33. Queer characters were common enough in silent film, but the means of presenting queerness in live performance often rested on innuendo in dialogue and vocal intonation. Thus, when sound film came in, urban audiences in particular were culturally primed for pansies, sissies, and lesbians. In terms of both mass dispersion and on-screen performance, sound gave queerness a new voice.

The use of gender performance rather than any actual sexual conduct as the final arbiter of sexuality in the Depression years manifests itself regularly in the queer humor of 1930s cinema. Perhaps the most famous example is of Cary Grant, caught wearing a woman’s frilly negligee in *Bringing Up Baby* (1938) and blurt out, “I just went gay all of a sudden!” As Chauncey notes, the queer connotations emerge “not because he had fallen in love with a man, but because he was asked why he had put on a woman’s nightgown. The possibility of a more precisely sexual meaning would not have been lost on anyone familiar with fairy stereotypes.”

One can find such understandings of gender and sexual identity in the writings of the Hollywood community. Olga J. Martin, devoted secretary of the Production Code Administration (PCA), in 1937’s *Hollywood’s Movie Commandments*, explains: “No hint of sex perversion may be introduced into a screen story. The characterization of a man as effeminate, or a woman as grossly masculine would be absolutely forbidden for screen portrayal. This means, too, that no comedy character may be introduced into a screen play pantomiming a pervert.” Clearly, Martin had been acculturated by widespread notions discussed by Chauncey.
regarding what a song of the day called “mannish-acting women and womanish-acting men”: gender performance for her equals sexual orientation.

The examples of gay male characters found in films from this period evoke a wide range of stereotypical associations. One finds effeminate hairdressers, clothing designers, tailors, and costumers in many films of the period, including Manhattan Parade (1932), The Scarlet Empress (1934), The Big Noise (1936), and Hollywood Hotel (1937). In Winner Take All (1932), for example, two tailors check out James Cagney’s posterior rather shamelessly while taking his measurements, while in Child of Manhattan (1932), a male character named Madame Dulcy tells Nancy Carroll, as he subjects her figure to scrutiny, not to see the “man” in him but only the “artist.” Similarly, male characters working in the fields of theater and dance were often queer, such as the fawned-over tango instructor in gay director George Cukor’s Our Betters (1933) or the beauty pageant choreographer of Fast and Furious (1939) who instructs contestants in the art of walking. The men in ten-gallon hats and fringed chaps whom cowpoke Joe E. Brown is delighted to find in New York in The Tenderfoot (1932) turn around to reveal themselves as lipstick and rouged chorus boys who acknowledge him with a flirtatious “Whoo!” Also memorable is the ballet instructor in Stage Mother (1933), whose exhortations to his girl pupils to be ethereal—“We are fairies, we are elves”—function as double entendre to “out” his character to knowing audiences. This revelation is not lost on the eponymous character, either; in return for special help to her daughter, she slyly offers to fix him up with new boyfriends.

Butlers and servants, especially valets and others who fit the title of “man’s man,” also sometimes suggest queerness or even express same-sex desire. Although in First Love (1939) one character played by Charles Coleman proclaims that “gay butlers are very rare!” the servant, also played by Coleman, in One Hour with You (1932) declares his eagerness to see his master in tights, and in Diplomaniacs (1933), he lisps and skips with abandon. One also finds pansies, sissies, and fops in such unsurprising settings as a bathhouse, flirting with sailors (Sailor’s Luck, 1933), at court (Marie Antoinette, 1938), and working behind the desk at a women’s hotel (Vivacious Lady, 1938). One particular location whose same-sex environs created opportunities for queer men or jokes about sissies was prison, whether it was in the comedy Up the River (1930), the cartoon Betty Boop for President (1932), or the social-protest drama Hell’s Highway (1932). The police line-up in the short Who Killed Rover? (1930), cast entirely with dogs, includes a pansy character arrested while strolling (cruising?) in the park, and the escaped killer exposed at the end of The Herring Murder Case (1930) is queer as well. The best-known examples here, though, are the two prisoners, arm in arm, sharing the same cell, whom Mae West dubs “the Cherry sisters” in She Done Him Wrong (1930). Even a fondness for writing poetry made male characters feminized and thereby queer, as in The Warrior’s Husband (1933) or the lovable title character of the animated The Reluctant Dragon (1941).

The title The Warrior’s Husband might in itself connote queerness, if we assume that the “warrior” is a man. The warriors in the film, however, are primarily women, and yet the queerness remains because the women, including a very butch
queen, are Amazons, set in a film in which genders are inverted in more ways than one. Several other female rulers simultaneously cross-dress and take on connotations of lesbianism. One thinks of Marlene Dietrich’s suddenly masculine appearance as she ascends the throne at the end of The Scarlet Empress and, even more notably, Greta Garbo as the monarch who declares herself not an “old maid” but “a bachelor” in Queen Christina (1933).

Other members of the lesbian parade inhabit spaces that, as with the men, connote queerness. Consider the lesbian couples in the Greenwich Village dive in Call Her Savage (1932), seated alongside male same-sex couples while pansy entertainers, dressed as maids, perform for their amusement. Mannishly garbed women barflies, sometimes wielding cigars, often pal around with men, or sometimes confuse and emasculate them, in Lawyer Man (1932), Grand Slam (1933), and Blood Money (1933).

Theaters and cabarets allow for female queerness as well as male, as women entertainers play with gender ambiguity in Broadway thru a Keyhole (1933) and, most famously, Morocco (1930), in which a tuxedo-clad Marlene Dietrich gives a woman a much-analyzed kiss on the mouth. Perhaps even more spectacular, though, is the lusty temptress Ancaria in Cecil B. DeMille’s epic of ancient Roman paganism, The Sign of the Cross (1932), who attempts to seduce the virginal Christian heroine with her dance to “The Naked Moon.” A lesbian also turns up amid the gender segregation of a prison in Ladies They Talk About (1933).

Given the social link made between codes of gender and sexuality and the realm of work and dress, women needed only to dress like men or to hold down “male” jobs to seem queer. “I beg your pardon, old man,” says the drunken filmmaker in What Price Hollywood? (1932) to a woman dining at a fashionable Hollywood watering hole, “who’s your tailor?” (Could this have been director George Cukor’s sly reference to Dorothy Arzner?) Within other fields of work and across a wide range of social classes, one finds that Aline MacMahon’s gas station attendant cum grease monkey in Heat Lightning (1934) and the businesslike, severely garbed female lawyer in gay director James Whale’s The Kiss before the Mirror (1933), a highly savvy character dubbed a “new kind of woman,” also carry connotations of lesbianism.

These effeminate men and mannish women, in an age that conflated gender performance with sexuality, were Hollywood’s representations of queer men and women. While well-known studies such as Vito Russo’s survey The Celluloid Closet have traversed similar ground, I want to show that such representation is much more widespread than any previous study would suggest. Furthermore, I want to examine the responses of Hollywood’s self-imposed content regulators at the PCA. I thus hope to contribute to the academic literature on the Production Code and to reflect on how and why attempts to eliminate queerness from films failed. Annette Kuhn has argued that censors occupy the contradictory position of producing prohibition. Following this lead, this article is a historically specific case study shaped as a poststructuralist critique of the hypocrisies of censorship. The politics of my intervention lie partly in my use of extant censorship files: I use the homophobic attempts to eliminate such representations against the grain of their intention, as historical evidence that these images were read as...
queer, thus helping to anchor my own readings of a nation whose crisis did not leave gender and sexuality unscathed.

I will argue that these images could have been read and indeed were read by spectators of the time as queer and did have the power to offend by their very presence, even though many of them are seemingly "negative" stereotypes. Their popularity, however, suggests that many people enjoyed these representations, possibly because they were stereotypes, but also possibly because they were something more. The exceptionally common nature of these queer representations—and the queer readings they entail—lend empirical weight to Alexander Doty's contention that "queerness, not straightness, just might be the most pervasive sexual dynamic at work in mass culture production and reception."13 I realize, of course, that Doty is speaking of queerness in production, dispersion, and reception in ways beyond representations within the texts of films. Nonetheless, these images are everywhere. As even the preceding cursory survey of a fraction of the films involved demonstrates, films with gay and lesbian characters span a wide variety of genres and every Hollywood studio. Even in Citizen Kane (1941) the brusque female librarian and the male security guard who is teased by the reporter visiting the Thatcher Memorial for possibly being "Rosebud"—perhaps implicating Thatcher himself—are lightly sketched-in lesbian and gay stereotypes of the time.13 Indeed, although Russo claims that Some Like It Hot (1959) was "virtually the only female impersonation sustained throughout an entire film since the teens,"14 he seems to have overlooked the two versions of the stage farce Charley's Aunt (featuring the queer personas of Charles Ruggles and Jack Benny in the title roles), which, made in 1930 and 1941, respectively, neatly bracket the Depression years.15

**Reading the Code, Reading Classical Hollywood Queerness.** Recent work in cinema studies by Lea Jacobs, Richard Maltby, Giuliana Muscio, Robert Sklar, G. Thomas Poe, Gregory Black, and others has examined how the practices of Hollywood filmmaking and reception in the 1930s dovetail, vis-à-vis the industry's attempts at self-regulation, with other narrative and stylistic trends of the period, as well as larger cultural currents of the Depression years. Concerns about what movies were showing, for example, intensified during the period: as Maltby notes, "Movie content and the concern with content were symptoms of a moral panic about social behavior, induced by the economic collapse."16 Concern over gender roles would occupy a central role in the ongoing struggle among studio profit motives, the varying demands of differently positioned spectators, and what was seen as the need for "suitable" representation in light of the Depression's crisis of masculinity and the family.

The areas of largest attention to date within cinema studies have been the gangster film and especially the "woman's film," specifically its "fallen woman" subgenre. Jacobs and Maltby have shown that such films illustrate the work of Hollywood's PCA, part of Will Hays's Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America (MPPDA), with respect to the narrative and discursive textuality of these films, as the PCA attempted to control such topical "moral threats" as prostitution and ethnic criminality. They argue that the films of 1934 (the year the

---

8 Cinema Journal 38, No. 2, Winter 1999
PCA was set up under Joseph Breen, replacing the weaker Studio Relations Committee [SRC]), while a “turning point” in the history of self-regulation, may not represent the mere “enforcement” of the Code, which was, to a large extent, already in place since 1930 and, indeed, part of a series of cautionary conventions dating from the 1920s.\(^7\)

The Production Code was notable for, among other things, the sometimes remarkable ways it attempted to regulate discourse in American film without baldly stating that certain textual elements were absolutely forbidden. Thus, expressions such as “should be avoided” and “should not suggest” were common. There are, however, several broad categories of representation on which the Code did not equivocate in the slightest. Clause six of section two on “Sex” states that “sex perversion or any inference to it is forbidden.” And yet, as my brief survey above suggests, Depression-era cinema exhibits a surprising number of characters, generally in small parts and often used for comic purposes, who are codified and readable as queer. (While I would never want to be accused of being a “size queen,” there are notable exceptions to even this “bit part” tendency.) Furthermore, given that the SRC and the PCA were mechanisms internal to the film industry to some extent, shaping content so that films would not encounter problems at the exhibition stage from local censors, I want to consider the queerness that survived industry regulators or, ironically, that they indirectly, indeed unwillingly, enabled. In what follows, I propose to take some of the historiographic models and conclusions reached by other scholars of this period and think about them in light of this particular “boundary value” test case. I thus hope to queer the cinema studies literature on the Production Code but, beyond that, to reconsider such paradigms precisely so as to apply them to the cultural roles that queerness in cinema played on the terrains of subversion, gender politics, and New Deal allegory during the Depression.

When scholars talk about queer representations or, more broadly, queer discourse in American films from this period, the word “subtext” invariably seems to “come out.” Chon Noriega has helpfully shown how an extratextual source such as film reviews could have cued audiences into the queerness censored from films based on queer Broadway plays. At one point, however, he writes:

> Like the Code’s authors, film critics tend to examine the film itself, and not the discursive acts that surround a film and play a sometimes central role in shaping its meaning(s). Contemporary gay and lesbian film criticism of Production Code era films operates on the same principle, with the added limitation that historical evidence and homosexual “images” either do not exist or were censored. Thus, in order to ensure “the survival of subcultural identity within an oppressive society,” gay and lesbian film critics have employed a wide range of interpretive strategies to recuperate a history of homosexual images from the censored screen. The emphasis, therefore, has been on “subtexting” censored films from a singular presentist perspective.\(^8\)

In a footnote, Noriega continues: “These [reading] strategies do not differentiate between the sensibilities and cinematic codes or iconography that existed during the Production Code era and those that are specific to the present.”\(^9\) Such claims suggest that queer discourse is “absent” from film during this period; that

*Cinema Journal 38, No. 2, Winter 1999*
censorship, which necessarily speaks that which it attempts to contain, is always completely successful; and that contemporary queer critics neither share nor can understand the sensibilities, codes, and oppressions of another era. Attending such charges are claims that critics who spot queerness in films are “reading too much into it” or “reading too hard”; I, for one, am very interested in “hard” readings. As Richard Dyer has noted, “Audiences cannot make media images mean anything they want to, but they can select from the complexity of the image the meanings and feelings, the variations, inflections and contradictions, that work for them.”

Placing queer discourse in the untheorized netherworld of “subtext” is a policing of reading strategies, the productiveness of reading, and the limits of meaning, as if the text speaks only a self-evident discourse for all spectator-readers, in effect cloeting both readers—historical and contemporary—and texts.

As for historical spectators, interview material that queerly reads 1930s film, admittedly of a necessarily retrospective nature, does exist in places such as the Lesbian Herstory Archives. We also have another group of readers whose very focus was on the films themselves, whose writings from the time exist and who, though hardly queer-identified, nonetheless did a great deal of queer reading, namely, our friends at the PCA! Censors at the PCA, for example, were very concerned that Dr. Monica (1934) would be the story of three women: “an alcoholic, a nymphomaniac, and a lesbian.” Consider also a letter dated October 7, 1935, from Joseph Breen to B. B. Kahane of RKO regarding an all-male dance lesson Fred Astaire administers to his sailor buddies in Follow the Fleet (1936): “We are assuming of course that you will exercise your usual good taste in this scene of the sailors learning to dance. There will be no attempt to inject any ‘pansy’ humor into the scene.”

Censors seem not only to have seen queerness but also to have examined it as a boundary case. What is more, they were afraid of the implications of reading queerness in films. Olga Martin writes:

> These “smart alecs” try to hold that nothing artistic has come out of Hollywood since the enforcement of the Production Code; that the Producers’ Association and Mr. Breen are a lot of fussy old maids, and the whole business of censoring pictures for grown-ups is an insulting and puerile undertaking. Yet it was only because of the PCA that the play, The Children’s Hour, with its implications of sex perversion, was recast into a natural love story. Many other examples could be mentioned.

How interesting that when Martin wants to give the most extreme example of what the PCA has done for Hollywood, she uses a case of the censorship of queerness. (Times haven’t changed much.) Even more striking is that, according to this excerpt, the censors—less intentionally—wanted to ward off queerness not only from the site of the films but from the site of censorship (that is, the site of reading itself) so that Martin ends up defending PCA head Breen and other censors, mostly men, from the charge of being “fussy old maids.”

Maltby seems to understand how reading opens up sites of queerness as well, however indirectly he says so, when he writes, “Much of the work of self-regulation lay in the maintenance of this system of conventions, and as such, it
operated, however *perversely*, as an enabling mechanism at the same time that it was a repressive one."24

If Breen and company were finding queerness everywhere in 1930s Hollywood product, we might want to take issue with Maltby when he states:

The textual evidence for Hollywood’s “challenge to traditional values” is conventionally provided by readings of a group of films invariably including three gangster movies, *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang*, Mae West, the Marx Brothers, and seldom totaling more than 20 movies, or less than 1 percent of Hollywood’s feature film output during the period 1930–34. It is too small and too familiar a sample on which to base so substantial a conclusion as that the filmmakers of Hollywood were fomenting social or moral disorder.25

While I agree that relying on the same small canon of films does not make for a very strong argument, Maltby’s contention does not so much put the issue to rest as to beg the rebuttal that perhaps we’re not looking at enough films. My evidence for queer references, characters, and situations in nearly 150 films out of those I’ve seen from the Depression era (both before and after 1934) strongly suggests that queers, far from being limited to the numbers claimed in highly controversial recent studies, are considerably more than 1 percent of the population—at least in filmic representation.26

Nonetheless, Maltby calls for a symptomatic criticism that reads the crises of the times through the refracting lenses of the cinema:

However, it is clear enough that many movies of the period contain symptoms of a cultural crisis within patriarchal capitalism: in crime films, the recurring motif of the death of the father, and the inadequacy of a figure who seeks to speak in the name of the father; the frequent depiction of a “distaste for the nuclear family” which [E. Ann] Kaplan identifies in *Blonde Venus*.27

What is strange here, though, is that contemporary scholars of the Production Code often confine themselves to films set in the contemporary 1930s as the ones that speak to the crisis of the Depression, with the examples cited here limited to the genres, the gangster film and the “women’s picture,” which have so dominated studies of the PCA. A truly symptomatic criticism might also be able to locate such anxieties in queer genres, including frothy musicals, vaudeville-based comedies, and horror fantasies as well as in more sober-minded drama.28

Furthermore, apart from one or two passing examples, scholars of the Code all but ignore the issue of queerness and the responses it provoked. *Our Betters* (1933) has, for example, been investigated in light of the SRC’s concern over possible objections the British market might have had to its scenes in court and how South American exhibitors and audiences would feel about the character of the gigolo, Pepi.29 Still untouched, however, is the brouhaha in the censorship files surrounding the brightly flaming character of Ernest, who completely dominates the entire last reel of the film with his tango lessons and gossipy repartee. Any consideration of the role queerness plays is essential to understanding both the Code and patriarchal capitalism.

*Cinema Journal* 38, No. 2, Winter 1999 11
The Question of Subversion. Maltby’s historiographic critique of a subversive canon debates with, to some extent, Robert Sklar’s Age of Turbulence/Age of Order paradigm for the pre- and post-Code periods.30 (These terms, used by many film historians and a wider public alike, are decidedly inaccurate. At least within academic spheres, “pre-PCA” and “post-PCA” would be better.) Sklar suggests that filmmakers “perpetrated” subversion, while Maltby questions whether Hollywood was “fomenting” social disorder. The latter writes:

Although a growing chorus of voices denounced the moral evils of the movies, it would be wrong to conclude that movies became more salacious or vicious between 1930 and 1934. With occasional exceptions, the reverse is the case, as both [Studio Relations Committee censor] Jason] Joy and state censors applied increasingly strict standards. But the early ’30s was a period of increasing moral conservatism in American culture, in which the film industry, along with other institutions of representation, failed to keep pace with “the growing demand for a return to decency in all of our leisure pursuits.” The industry was pedaling backward as fast as it could, but not fast enough for its opponents, who in 1933 found themselves, for the first time, in the ascendant.31

Perhaps both Sklar’s and Maltby’s choice of verbs, “perpetrating” and “fomenting,” respectively, are a bit strong for an industry whose first imperative was, as Sklar notes, always a fast buck. Nonetheless, Sklar’s distinction is useful for both my historical, politically aware symptomatology and my attendant textual analyses. After all, the gangster film briefly gets worse between 1930 and 1932 before it is effectively banished. The women’s picture sometimes supports the argument (compare the promiscuous Norma Shearer of Strangers May Kiss [1931] and A Free Soul [1931] with the demure Shearer of Smilin’ Through [1932]), but, even here, we should not exclude the boldness, however ultimately compromised, of The Story of Temple Drake (1933), Baby Face (1933), Dr. Monica (1934), and Shearer’s Riptide (1934). Among neglected genres, the bullet-ridden zombies of White Zombie (1932), the synthetic flesh of Dr. X (1932), the vivisection of Charles Laughton in Island of Lost Souls (1932), the snake’s attack on Lionel Atwill at the end of Murders in the Zoo (1933), and the skinning alive of Boris Karloff in The Black Cat (1934) far outstrip, often via shock cutting tactics, the more genteel incidents and visual highlights of Frankenstein and Dracula in 1931. To take a very different (but equally queer) genre, the salaciousness of such Busby Berkeley musical numbers as “Pettin in the Park” from Goldiggers of 1933 (1933), “By a Waterfall” in Footlight Parade (1933), and “Spin a Little Web of Dreams” in Fashions of 1934 (1934) tops anything he had done before 42nd Street (1933). Neither Maurice Chevalier’s nor Eddie Cantor’s material tones down entirely during this period, Wheeler and Woolsey act naughtier as they go along, and the downright raunchy series of Baby Burlesks that launched Shirley Temple appear in 1932 and 1933.32

Consonant with these other transgressions, Hollywood is at its most queer from early 1932 to mid-1934, a period that corresponds to the worst years of the Depression. Not only does the number of incidents increase but we also see more explicit references, longer scenes, and sometimes surprisingly substantial charac-

12 Cinema Journal 38, No. 2, Winter 1999
ters. Perhaps most important, the pansy and lesbian characters of the period remain, respectively, effeminate and mannish but become increasingly sexualized in 1933–34. As the Depression continued, however, the need to establish a “suitable” masculinity becomes important to the watchdogs of morality in film, paralleling the highly masculinist imagery funded by New Deal federally sponsored public art in the mid- and late 1930s. Thus, there may yet be some virtue to arguments about Hollywood pushing the envelope, not so much in the interests of writing a history of discrete, “before and after” turning points, dates, and events as in avoiding a uniform model, always properly functioning, of the so-called classical Hollywood cinema. Subversion of morality might not have been intended, but it might have been the result of the subversion or failure of industrial practices. Indeed, it might be well to keep in mind Dominick LaCapra’s historiographic insight: “The apparent paradox is that texts hailed as perfections of a genre or a discursive practice may also test and contest its limits.”

Maltby himself notes Warner Bros.’ lack of cooperation with the Code until the bitter end and how Paramount, which was cooperative under B. P. Schulberg, decided to be “as daring as possible” under Emmanuel Cohen in 1932 and 1933. At MGM, Irving Thalberg’s resistance only really ended with his heart attack and journey abroad to recover in 1933. As James Wingate, Breen’s SRC predecessor, put things that same year:

I wonder why companies at this time, when we all desire to present pictures in conformity with the Code, continue to purchase and present for approval material which, even after a great deal of work has been done on it, must be close to the border line. The fact that some of these are even submitted to us, in my opinion, indicates a degeneration on the part of the person or company responsible for the purchase and presentation of such material.

Consider how in 1934 Jack Warner did not respond to Breen’s letter and later phone calls about a scene openly expressing homoerotic desire in Wonder Bar (1934) in which a man walks onto a dance floor and interrupts a male-female couple with “May I cut in?” When the woman responds, “Why certainly,” the man glares at her briefly, opting to dance with the other man, leading witness Al Jolson to exclaim, “Boys will be boys. Whooh!” Breen would later write, “It is quite evident that the gentleman [Warner] is giving me the runaround. He evidently thinks that this is the smart thing to do.”

An even more remarkable example is how RKO handled the SRC with respect to Diplomaniacs (1933), which includes a scene in which Wheeler and Woolsey, in bed together, are attended by a pansy butler before Woolsey helps Wheeler on with a negligee. As Wingate wrote to Will Hays, first the film was premiered without informing the SRC censors. RKO put off showing them the film until eleven days later, did not return a series of calls, and claimed to have left messages that were not received. When a meeting finally took place almost two weeks later, Wingate observed that the scripts they had received while the film was in production never contained the offending scene. The studio, meanwhile, claimed that the film’s negative had already been shipped to New York, that Wheeler and Woolsey were on a

Cinema Journal 38, No. 2, Winter 1999 13
foreign tour, and that changing the sequence would disrupt sound continuity in the film's score. The scene remained in the film.

In the light of such evidence, rather than suggest that there was only a gradual, linear, if too-slow "cleaning up" between 1930 and 1934 and beyond, I would instead contend that there was resistance to the SRC on the part of Hollywood filmmakers. They attempted to replace one kind of unsuitable material with another, which may still have pushed at boundaries so as to attract the crucial sophisticated urban audience but was considered by Breen and others to be of less "dangerous" (to use a favorite word of Breen’s) semiotic import. The violence of the gangster films was used early on to attract ticket buyers, and when that genre was clamped down upon, producers resorted to sex. As the battles were fought over the "fallen woman" and "gold digger" films, producers tried to get away with making horror films and comedies more shocking and raw, given that these films' more "unrealistic" nature somehow made them harmless in the eyes of censors. I thus find it also quite likely that filmmakers stepped up pansy humor in films with the thought that they could get away with scenes, characters, and jokes aimed in that direction.

A good example is gay director James Whale's *The Invisible Man* (1933), which, in monthly reports from the SRC in Hollywood to Will Hays in New York, was generally categorized with horror films. While there was concern at early scripting stages about lines spoken by the power- and drug-crazed protagonist in which he plans to kill government officials, the film was later characterized in a January 6, 1933, letter from James Wingate to Hays as in a "highly fantastic and exotice [sic] vein, and presents no particular censorship difficulties." This from a film in which the title character still spouts his radical (if megalomaniacal) ideas extensively, romps about in the nude (OK, so he is invisible), and enjoys plenty of pansy humor (e.g., skipping about to "Here we go gathering nuts in May"). One can metaphorically
read society’s invisible man as its homosexual man: effeminate, dangerous when naked, seeking a male partner in “crime,” tending to idolize his fiancée rather than love her, and becoming “visible” only when shot by the police, monitored by doctors, and heard regretting his sin against God (i.e., made into a statistic by the three primary forces oppressing queers: the law, the medical establishment, and religious orthodoxy).  

The Question of Difference. To further situate 1930s queerness within the context of a crisis in masculinity, Antony Easthope, in his book on the construction of masculinity in popular culture, sees the masculine ego as a defensive entity fearful of difference. Early sound film overflows with difference and, what is more, difference based on sound. New cinematic universes create a dichotomy between talk and action, with talk taking over. With the final passing of the Old West in the teens seeming very far away by the 1930s, the cowboy fades as the dominant American hero. So do all the silent comedians, lost in an ocean of talk, along with the swashbuckler, whose acrobatics early talkies seem neither willing nor able to accommodate. The aviator briefly becomes important as an American hero, but his machines are at least as impressive as he is. He is frequently earthbound—and stagebound—for plot exposition, and the kidnapping of the Lindbergh baby (1932) seems to clip his wings. Indeed, given that the gangster does not have staying power, in many ways one of the dominant U.S. heroes becomes the doctor, whose potency in film is based much more on talk and skillful caregiving than on physical action. (One could also add even more overtly patriarchal figures. Consider the judge, as in the Andy Hardy films, which began in 1937, in which Andy’s father saves the day with a wise word, and also the priest, seen in films such as Boys Town and Angels with Dirty Faces, both 1938.)

While men had been able to dominate the action arena, they could not do so when it came to talking. In light of the fact that nowadays one finds at most one or two female stars among Hollywood’s most bankable makes comparison all the more vivid when one sees how the early 1930s woman, continuing the trends of the 1920s in a radically altered cinema, talked her way into six of the top ten positions on the box-office charts from 1931 through 1934. Even later in the decade, with the rise of the screwball comedy, women were much more present on the chart than they ever have been since. Historian SusanWare makes this connection between women’s speech and power when she writes, “Since women seem more autonomous the more they are allowed to talk on the screen, the heroines of . . . screwball comedies emerge as wonderful, if somewhat wacky, characters with brains of their own.” Elizabeth Kendall concurs:

The thirties romantic comedy stars . . . stood . . . for a vibrant strength of character . . . act[ing] untragically sure of themselves. Having these women in our movie history . . . means that we possess an inherited idea of a spacious and prideful femininity. Such an idea could not have surfaced in the movies without the economic chaos of the thirties. . . . Poverty and uncertainty played havoc with people’s assumptions about themselves. . . . Put another way, Depression romantic comedies responded to their audience’s loss of faith by making a virtue of traits usually thought of as feminine.
When voices were heard, they were much more diverse than silent film intertitles were able to manage via colorfully written slang used to suggest genteel southerners, undereducated African Americans, or hesitant immigrants. Despite the heinous prejudices often inherent in mainstream media stereotyping, early talkies were uniquely heteroglossic, with the unabashedly Gallic and Latina innuendoes of Chevalier and Lupe Velez; the Brooklyn sounds of Clara Bow, Barbara Stanwyck, James Cagney, and others; an English accent from Ronald Colman that substantially boosted his star status (as did the affectedly broad a’s of Joan Crawford); and the heavy Scandinavian intonations of Garbo and fellow Swede El Brendel, one of many dialect comedians of the day, and one whose Latino-sounding stage name summed up the period’s polyphony. Will Rogers’s drawl was treasured, his slow delivery appropriate for a middle-aged performer who briefly became Hollywood’s most popular male star in 1933 and 1934, and Stepin Fetchit’s even slower, mush-mouthed version of black vernacular helped him win a long-term studio contract. The elaborately stage-trained voices of Ruth Chatterton, Marie Dressler, and George Arliss were impressive enough to help them surmount Hollywood’s age barriers, and this was the era when attempts were made to make a movie star out of the uniquely gender-bending pipes of Tallulah Bankhead. And, of course, one must not forget the many foreign-language productions shot simultaneously with their English counterparts on studio lots.

Given that this explosion of voices transcended barriers of age, race, gender, ethnicity, and class (John Barrymore always sounded aristocratic, Wallace Beery almost never did), it should perhaps not “sound” surprising that even barriers based on sexuality would not hold firm. Furthermore, if the power of the feminine, which had gathered such momentum in the 1920s with women’s suffrage and high-powered female executives, activists, and movie stars who doubled as their own producers, could be augmented via the voice, pansy characters, too, who flitted all through the Jazz Age, could rise to the occasion as well.

Character actors such as Pangborn, Sutton, and Horton, who would specialize in sissy roles, came to prominence during the later years of silent film and especially in early talkies. Historian Richard Barrios contends that gay silent stars Ramon Novarro and William Haines were partially “outed” by talkies; they overcame the sound barrier until MGM dropped them by 1934.50

Audiences seemed to delight in the flip, fruity, risqué repartee of pre-PCA queers as these “free radicals” flitted gayly through film texts, often near their openings and largely unburdened by plot or any recuperative strategies. Consider, for example, the effeminate man who opens Palmy Days (1931) by entering a bakery and requesting a pansy on the cake he orders. This curiosity about new voices, which would so quickly turn to revulsion (think about, for instance, how many fewer Jews are found in the post-PCA period compared to silent and pre-PCA days), seemed to be summed up on film in a brief scene from a Fox mystery of 1931, The Secret Witness. Fluttery switchboard operator ZaSu Pitts is found reading Radclyffe Hall’s best-selling landmark lesbian novel The Well of Loneliness and trying to explain, over a phone line to a girlfriend, what it’s really all about.

16 Cinema Journal 38, No. 2, Winter 1999
The Role of Lesbian Representation in a Masculinity Crisis. What lesbianism was “really all about” during the 1930s merits particular consideration. The lesbian of mainstream 1930s cinema was influenced by the discourse of the working “New Woman” and the “aristocratic dyke” culture that found its quintessential expression in Radclyffe Hall’s novel. The most overt instantiation of the lesbian discussed earlier, with her severely tailored suit, monocle, and short hair, was, admittedly, less common than the pansy and not really a character actor’s stock role. Nonetheless, lesbianism was arguably more subtly pervasive than its male counterpart, sissiness. Major female stars could have mild lesbian connotations, albeit not called such and masked as strength or exoticism, accrue to their images (Ginger Rogers, Eleanor Powell, Marlene Dietrich, Katharine Hepburn, Clara Bow, Greta Garbo, Barbara Stanwyck, Ruth Chatterton). Furthermore, lesbianism or lesbian overtones, typically signified by tomboyishness, was sometimes portrayed and read more seriously in films. This might be because if the pansy was perceived as a failure, the lesbian was seen as a threat.

Any qualifications aside, lesbian representation did occur in Hollywood film of the period and had connections to Depression-era attitudes, ideologies, and culture. Often, lesbian imagery in a culture can suggest a transgression very different from gay maleness, insofar as lesbianism encompasses a range of sexualities not predicated on the literal presence of men and as such is underrepresented because it threatens the very bounds of the representable. During an era in which masculinity was in crisis, such an immanent critique of heteropatriarchy, signified by the positing of men as optional to sexuality itself, would be especially threatening. Censor Olga Martin’s praiseworthy reference to the rewriting of the play The Children’s Hour for its first film version (These Three, 1936) was, significantly, a repression of lesbian representation. Nonetheless, even some of the extreme implications of the symbolic absence of men were dramatized during this period. It’s Great to Be Alive (1933), made during the worst year of the Depression, literally has all the men on the planet (except one) die from a mysterious disease and, as a result, some of the women “turn” to lesbianism.

A surprising amount of the lesbian discourse of the period does not exist apart from gay maleness; it is part of a pervasive perversity. Examples of lesbian representation existing alongside, and sometimes in dialogic relation to, pansy humor are in the gay bar sequence in Call Her Savage (1932), in The Warrior’s Husband (1933), in which the butch Amazon queen marries a pansy, and in The Sign of the Cross (1932), Paree Paree (1934), Sylvia Scarlett (1936), Stage Door (1937), and Turnabout (1940). Although the sizable PCA file on Turnabout suggests that industry regulators were most hysterical about a flirtatious scene between Franklin Pangborn and the male protagonist, who has magically switched bodies with his wife, lesbianism goes hand in hand with the male queerness, as the potentially threatening female takes up phallic cigars and takes over at the office. Lesbianism is thus significant for another reason, as the limitations of a binary, hierarchical gender system are thus opened up for critique. In other words, when patriarchy admits to only two genders, feminizing a man seems to require the masculinizing of a woman, and vice versa. A heterocentric system of oppression relies on queerness to establish normalcy, and yet that
same queerness only breeds other queernesses, further undermining the system it was meant to bolster. Gay director George Cukor’s *Our Betters* (1933) is a good example. Here, a previously unseen, eagerly awaited pansy dance instructor monopolizes the film’s last reel, effects a reconciliation between the film’s two primary female characters, and ends the film with a lesbian discourse-tinged line, “Ah! What an exquisite spectacle! Two ladies of title kissing one another!”

During the Depression, such butch, powerful, cross-dressing, or simply intimate and affectionate women were often portrayed (and read) less as potentially lesbian than as shrews requiring taming. They were represented as women who were judged within the discourse of a film to need a man, give up a career, or stifle disruptive eccentricities. Consider Martin’s remarks linking gender performance with sexual orientation: while male effeminacy is to be avoided completely, a slight manliness will be tolerated in women because tomboyishness may be useful (just don’t be “grossly masculine,” she says the Code warns). Such qualities may be manifested by women whose need to work and be strong was necessary to meet the demands of the Depression. In an age of a masculinity crisis, though, the corresponding feminine qualities of male “perverts” are completely unacceptable. Thus, discourses about queer sexuality in this period are never purely homophobic against men. To a sizable extent, they have their basis in sexism against women, for it is the power of femininity, the “feminization” of 1930s culture mentioned earlier, and the threat of working women “wearing the pants” that are being policed.

The metaphorical nature of the pants-wearing, money-earning woman attaining independence from men connoted lesbianism as a complete break from the interwoven financial and sexual economies of patriarchy. Thus, if “clothes make the man,” the wearing of pants in and of itself suggested a link to lesbianism that films of the time simultaneously offered as spectacle and punishment. One example is the lesbian puppet who reveals her “nature” in a musical number set at the gates of Hell in *I Am Suzanne!* (1933). Asked to declare her identity, she states: “A woman, alas, by nature’s plan / But I like to dress up like a man.” The patriarchal male devil responds that he “pulls the strings”; in this case it is literal as well as figurative, as the puppet is cast into the flames, along with that undesirable vision of 1930s maleness, the gangster, and the castrating figure of the mother-in-law. Sometimes, though, the independent career lesbian escapes unscathed. In James Whale’s *The Kiss before the Mirror* (1933), the career-oriented, mannishly garbed “New Woman” lawyer connotes slight copresent suggestions of heterosexuality, which might have “protected” her. She does, however, offer a sardonic critique of heterosexism. Discussing with another woman a case in which a husband has murdered his wife, she notes one of the advantages of not marrying: “At least no one will ever murder me.” She also responds to the question, “What are you? A lawyer, or a new kind of woman?” by noting, “By day, I’m a lawyer. At night, well, you might be surprised.” Despite her strong connotations of lesbianism, the SRC left her alone in her queer textual ambiguity.

Indeed, the moments of most overtly “pansified” male representation in *Wonder Bar, Follow the Fleet*, and especially *Turnabout* (1940) and *So This Is Africa*
(1933) seem to have provoked more outrage than most of the comparable lesbian scenes of the period.\textsuperscript{51} The PCA file on \textit{Queen Christina} (1933) contains much more panic about the unwed Christina sharing a room and potentially having sex with a male diplomat than it does about her lesbian-coded relationship with her lady-in-waiting. Similarly, Sandra Shaw’s prominent quasi-dyke in \textit{Blood Money} (1933) was not heavily criticized by the PCA, but more instances were mentioned and complained about in the period from 1933 to 1936.\textsuperscript{52} Wheeler and Woolsey’s \textit{So This Is Africa}, by contrast, especially in its last reel, with the boys getting “married” to two of the male natives, was edited to the point of creating glaring discontinuity. Later in the decade the possible circulation of the fantasy-comedy \textit{Turnabout} containing the aforementioned gay flirtation scene and the hero’s climactic pregnancy brought a panicked flurry of telegrams desperately trying to halt the film’s release.\textsuperscript{53} With lesbianism, though, the PCA saw the obvious connection between vampirism and sexual desire in \textit{Dracula’s Daughter} (1936) but gave only two warnings about possible queerness between the countess and her two female victims. Universal, in promoting the film, even played up this angle to some extent with the publicity catch phrase, “Save the women of London from Dracula’s Daughter!”\textsuperscript{54} Making women monsters—and keeping them victims at the same time—could be accommodated quite comfortably by the Code. PCA files even refer to a film project by Universal entitled \textit{The Loves of Women}, which correspondence quite frankly says deals with “lesbianism.” The film appears not to have been made, but the very consideration of such a production is striking.\textsuperscript{55}

George Cukor’s \textit{Sylvia Scarlett} (1936), which caused a great deal of PCA consternation, is to some degree the exception to this tendency: the PCA was concerned about Katharine Hepburn’s male disguise promoting lesbianism disguised as heterosexuality. But this film also encompasses male queerness as well as female, and a heterosexuality that the characters suggest is a bit gay (e.g., Brian Aherne’s line to Hepburn: “I know what it is that gives me a queer feeling when I look at you”).\textsuperscript{56} Of course, these censorship trends are historically specific. Ancaria’s frottage-laden dance of lesbian seduction in \textit{The Sign of the Cross} (1932) did cause a storm of controversy and had to be deleted for later reissues of the film.\textsuperscript{57} Nonetheless, Cecil B. DeMille did ram his orgiastic vision of ancient Rome and his equally didactic portrait of early Christianity down the throats of thrill-seekers and prudes alike, and the film played through the peak queer years of 1932 and 1933. When referring to different queernesses, the PCA did usually manage to refer to “lesbianism” or “lesbian content” but seems to have no word for gay male representation. It is usually referred to, only in quotation marks, as “perversion,” “that kind of humor,” “effeminacy,” “‘pansy’ humor,” or “too ’pansy,’” ironically utilizing one of the words the PCA itself forbade in late 1933.

\textbf{Battles to Establish Masculinity in the New Deal, Post-PCA Period.} As the Depression continued, men’s performances of their gender roles became, to some extent, something that powerful sectors within U.S. culture no longer felt could be ridiculed. Yet pansy and lesbian humor were evidently still seen as titillating to the sophisticated urban audiences so crucial to Depression-era revenues. Much of the
Figure 2. The lustful Ancaria (Joyzelle, right) attempts to seduce the virtuous Mercia (Elissa Landi) in The Sign of the Cross (Paramount, 1932).  

Scholarly work on the PCA is strongest in explaining how the Code tried to at once repress and enable discourse to appeal to the broadest possible spectrum of viewers and to offend the fewest. The work of several notable scholars comes together here: Ruth Vasey’s useful expression is the “principle of deniability,” whereby audiences were compelled to interpret elliptically vague or “contradictory cinematic evidence.” Maltby explains “deniability” further as a particular kind of ambiguity, a textual indeterminacy that shifted the responsibility for determining what the movie’s contents was away from the producer to the individual spectator. As Lea Jacobs has argued, under the Code “offensive ideas could survive at the price of an instability of meaning. . . . There was constant negotiation about how explicit films could be and by what means (through the image, sound, language) offensive ideas could find representation.” . . . [Censor Jason] Joy [of the SRC] recognized that if the Code was to remain effective, it had to allow the studios to develop a system of representational conventions “from which conclusions might be drawn by the sophisticated mind, but which would mean nothing to the unsophisticated and inexperienced.” . . . the Code was the mechanism by which this multiplicity of viewing positions was achieved.58

This fits well with what happened to homosexuality during the late SRC and post-PCA period. In some cases, studios and producers attempted to use deniability literally to argue with content regulators about the interpretation of scenes. Consider the battle over a gag in International House (1933) in which W. C. Fields, misinterpreting Franklin Pangborn’s reference to “Wuhu” China as queer flirtation, denies the connotations of his own boutonniere, “Don’t let the posy fool ya.” The high content of sexual innuendo in the film led censor Carl Milliken to write to Breen: “The dirty minded lout who put it in the picture knew perfectly well, however, what he was doing and undoubtedly felt he had gained something by getting away with it.” A. M. Botsford of Paramount, however, wrote a denial to
James Wingate that “Fields’ line ‘Don’t let the flower deceive you’ indicates merely a ‘sissy’ reaction. It would take an expert in abnormal psychology to wheedle out of that an inference of sex perversion.”

Of course, these censorship trends are historically specific, and lesbian imagery could be both more and less controversial than queer male imagery, sometimes depending on the degree of same-sex desire represented. What needs to be emphasized in the case of queer discourse, though, if we don’t want to flatten out the changes between the two periods, is that more depends on the subtlety of interpretation, given that such Production Code “code” words as “pansy,” “fairy,” and “lezzie” are very specifically banned completely. Furthermore, the use of the word “lavender” (or, in the case of 1933’s Only Yesterday, a mixture of blue and mauve!), though not outlawed in any PCA writing, makes no more appearances in the post-PCA period. The post-PCA period of the later Depression years from 1935 to 1942 is notable not only for its proliferation of child stars and male-female costarring teams, as Hollywood tries aggressively to promote innocence and heterosexuality, but also for its many male-male buddy teams (Clark Gable and Spencer Tracy, James Cagney and Pat O’Brien, Bob Hope and Bing Crosby). Characters are less likely to be supporting pansies than stars who indulge in queer banter largely to prove how manly they are. The best-known example here is the relationship between Jeff (Cary Grant) and “The Kid” (Thomas Mitchell) in Howard Hawks’s Only Angels Have Wings (1939). Less sensitively drawn yet perhaps more prototypical is Test Pilot (1938). It stars Clark Gable, Hollywood’s most popular male star beginning almost immediately with the post-PCA period and a virtual paradigm for a homophobic yet fully queer star masculinity. In Test Pilot, he flirts with his mechanic (Tracy), who dies at the end, by saying “I love you” while simultaneously pleasing “perfect wife” Myrna Loy (that same year crowned Hollywood’s “queen” to Gable’s “king”). Normalcy is established by toying with, and resisting, queerness.

Even the word “gay,” which, according to some writers, had queer connotations in the United States even then, appears in fewer film titles after early 1935. Cary Grant’s aforementioned line in Bringing Up Baby, “I just went gay all of a sudden,” was, as Vito Russo notes, never in any official version of the film’s script. Chauncey, meanwhile, agrees that “gay” had queer connotations in American culture by this time and observes that the likewise ad-libbed line that follows, “I’m just sitting in the middle of 42nd Street waiting for a bus,” if anything clarifies the “gay” line’s meaning as it refers, in a pre–Christopher Street era, to what was then New York’s most prominent gay cruising ground. While a sizable percentage of 1930s Manhattanites would surely get the joke, few others would.

Getting rid of a few heavily denotative slang labels clearly wasn’t enough, yet the “principle of deniability” was often exercised via a few coy behavioral tics suggesting effeminacy or, for that matter, ethnicities or political positions less welcome on American screens than they had been in the pre-PCA period. Maltby aptly notes, for instance, that “an increasingly insecure Protestant provincial middle class sought to defend its cultural hegemony from the incursions of a modernist, metropolitan culture that the provincials regarded as alien—a word that was often, but not always, a synonym for Jewish.” Although I agree, “modernist,” “metropolitan,” and “alien”

Cinema Journal 38, No. 2, Winter 1999

This content downloaded from 164.15.128.33 on Sun, 17 Nov 2013 12:11:06 PM
All use subject to JSTOR Terms and Conditions
might also aptly describe the intellectual, the leftist and the homosexual, as well as the Jew. Indeed, in at least one case the “alien” quality of the queer was made literal. In the science-fiction musical Just Imagine (1930), an effeminate Martian standing by his planet’s female ruler is characterized by Earthman El Brendel, “She’s not the queen, he is!” This dialogue, and the Martian’s reaction, in the words of the SRC, “make it appear that he is ‘queer.’”65 And sometimes, of course, more than two of these discourses overlap. To take an example from another realm of cultural production, painter Paul Cadmus’s “sailors and floozies” trilogy (1933–38), in which pansies are shown making liaisons with sailors, was criticized as the work of a “Communist Jew,” when in fact Cadmus was neither.66

By such terms as “alien,” “Jew,” and “queer,” I refer not only to what such people were in any literal sense but also to how they were perceived and represented and how markers of cultural categorization and rabidly right-wing discourses of anti-Semitism and homophobia have intermingled in the history of political oppression perpetrated in the name of patriarchal nationalism. Such interrelated bigotries served specific functions not only in Nazi Germany, in which the Holocaust centrally targeted Jews and also persecuted gays, but among the more fascistic discourses of U.S. culture that differed in degree though perhaps not necessarily in kind.67 Other ethnicities and minorities are linked with queerness in Depression-era films (e.g., blacks in So This Is Africa [1933] and Wonder Bar [1934] and Italians in Colleen [1936], The Gay Divorcee [1934], and Top Hat [1935]). No less a figure than Mussolini objected to the queers Erik Rhodes played in the latter two films, claiming that they did not represent “true Italian manhood.”68 The Jewish-queer link, however, is often especially pronounced during this period. The most prominent example is Eddie Cantor’s star persona, but there is also the Jewish pansy choreographer Max Mefoofsky, played by Gregory Ratoff in Broadway thru a Keyhole (1933). Ratoff also plays the role of Pinkowitz in I’m No Angel (1933), whose name Mae West spells as beginning with “P . . . as in pansy.” In the post-PCA period, visible markers of ethnicity diminish in American film, and yet a notable textual elision occurs in The Life of Emile Zola (1937). Admittedly a fairly bold film in indirectly addressing anti-Semitism via a dramatization of the Dreyfus affair, the script nonetheless never mentions the word “Jew”; Zola does, however, call the case “queer.”69

The incursions of queer culture entailed a backlash as the Depression led America in an increasingly conservative direction. The formation of the PCA and the stronger enforcing of the Code were only part of the era’s construction of what would by the 1940s and 1950s be firmly built as “the closet.”70 Studios often did not heed the suggestions or insistences of industry content regulators, however, or compromised only slightly, making modest trims to pacify the PCA but leaving queerness intact. RKO producer Pandro Berman was, it seems, a bit evasive about a scene Breen wanted removed from Top Hat (1935) in which Erik Rhodes apologizes to Edward Everett Horton by kissing him on both cheeks, with witness Helen Broderick quipping, “Go right ahead, boys, don’t mind me.”71 The studio did finally agree to trim Broderick’s reaction shot slightly but not completely, leaving its queer connotations fully intact.

22 Cinema Journal 38, No. 2, Winter 1999
As the 1930s progressed, activity readable as queer by “sophisticated” audiences was more actively contained, contradicted, or even punished over the course of a film. In the musicals starring Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire, for instance, which seemed (to the PCA as well as later historians) to be among the queerest films of the post-PCA period, the sissy is given a wife or actually contends for Rogers’s hand. We also see very queer by-play in the elevator between songwriters George Murphy and Hugh Herbert in *Top of the Town* (1937) as they try out prospective titles for romantic ditties on each other while the heroine (Doris Nolan) misunderstands the men’s conversation as gay. She later very pointedly asks about their antics, only to have their activity explained to her. Most violently, we witness the death of the lesbian vampire in *Dracula’s Daughter* (1936) at the hands of her “pimp” when he symbolically rapes her with a phallic wooden shaft through the heart at the film’s “climax.”

Readers, too, are policed by discourses surrounding the cinema. Edward Everett Horton’s role in *Holiday* (1938) is praised by the *New York Times* as being more subdued than usual and one in which his off-screen wife actually respects him. The article plays up his early stage days as a romantic lead before speaking of “a certain muliebrity of manner” in his 1930s screen career “which has caused certain of the more captious among filmgoers to accuse him of effeminacy,” suggesting just how common readings of Horton as queer must have been. As if the threat of being labeled “captious” weren’t bad enough, studios sometimes insured the status of their contract players as early as 1933 via physical threats: “Call Franklin Pangborn a sissy offstage and he’ll plant five hard knuckles on your proboscis” stated RKO press release material for their early Ginger Rogers vehicle, *Professional Sweetheart* (1933).

Nonetheless, policing strategies such as these, whether within or surrounding film texts, failed to eliminate queerness from Hollywood cinema. Queerness was both too entertaining and, in some cases, simply too necessary to the ideological value of many films, including *The Big Noise* (1936), a very routine, fifty-six-minute film from Warner Bros. which relies structurally on queerness in its allegorizing of a New Deal saga. Its story is that of the classic embodiment of the individualism of the American Dream, the small business owner. Trent (Guy Kibbee) has built his garment manufacturing business from the ground up, always committed to honestly giving his customers a quality product, but with the Depression, he finds his profits are slipping. A member of his board of directors, Andrews (William B. Davidson), engineers a takeover of the business in which a cheaper but less durable synthetic fabric, Woolex (dubbed “a new deal for the Trent mills”), will be used to make a flashier, more colorful line of Trent product. The designer of this line is the pansyish Mr. Rosewater (Andre Berenger), who replaces Trent’s blue serge with robin’s egg blue, seaweed green, and oyster gray and his “honest tweed” with “powder-puff texture.” Trent loses control of his own business and storms out. He tries retirement, but, after talking with a very vigorous fellow senior citizen about the importance of being active (i.e., a man), decides to start over again from scratch. He soon teams up with an enterprising young inventor (Warren Hull) in buying and running a dry cleaning store.
Before long, Trent has made a success of his business and has rid the town of gangster elements who have been pressuring small businesses to pay them “protection” money. Meanwhile, Woolex has provoked complaints among sellers and customers alike. Rosewater, for one, is at a loss to understand how buyers can quibble about durability when his color schemes are just “too divine.” Andrews is booted out of the company, and Trent retakes his old position, his “values” having won out. Even this short description of the film should make obvious that the character of Rosewater, whose color, fabric, and fashion obsessions are completely impractical (read: feminine), is a continuation of the overtly queer pansies more prevalent in pre-PCA days. He is linked with the excesses of the 1920s via the recurrent mention of “powder-puff” colors, textures, and styles, the description recalling the names Rudolph Valentino was called when his prettified persona led some critics to question his masculinity.  

What interests me even more, however, is the role Rosewater plays in the film’s ideological work as New Deal allegory. He and Andrews stand in for all those superficial, grab-for-a-buck values that the opportunistic 1920s promoted and for which people during the Depression were both literally and figuratively “paying the price.” A name like Rosewater suggests all the perfumed affectations that symbolize a failure of masculinity, whose ultimate expression took the form of homosexuality, for which effeminacy stood in both metonymically and allegorically. Indeed, Rosewater’s status as a man is specifically questioned once Trent is temporarily out of work. (The temporary nature of his status is important; this is, after all, a Depression-era success fable.) Trent describes Rosewater to his elderly friend as “a man—or something—back in my factory.” During one of Trent’s tirades about what’s going wrong with “his” company, Rosewater is framed in the background, out of focus but clearly visible, as if to serve as a visual pointer for precisely those practices, those values, Trent is indicting.

In a preproduction and early shooting script for the film—significantly, its working title was the more allegorically clear Big Business—more screen time was devoted to Rosewater’s pansy humor. At one point, Rosewater, never far from his “powder-puff” shades and unnatural textures, misplaces his “Pussywillow Weave.” He also wears one of his creations in one sequence, sashaying about, hand on hip, like a (female) model. Later, he must also endure the scorn of a burly factory worker who totes his bolts of fabric, calling him “Mr. Rosepetal” and recalling the roswater that (feminizing) mothers used to put in their sons’ hair. Rosewater even expresses a gushy attraction to the scornful Trent, remarking, “Isn’t he dynamic?” after one of Trent’s speeches. The PCA, however, in reviewing a first script, called attention to two points “that may prove to be dangerous if not rightly treated.” One was the potential gangster flavor of the racketeers; recommendations were made that gun battles take place offscreen. The other, ultimately more problemmatic matter was that “whenever Rosewater appears, neither dialogue nor action must lend a pansy flavor to his character. Anything savoring of ‘pansy’ is, as you know, quite definitely objectionable.”

Two weeks later, the PCA found a revised script “basically satisfactory,” but a month after that, the film as shot still posed problems. The gun battle was “now
satisfactory” even if a shot of a bomb being thrown was frowned upon. More difficult, however, was still the minor figure of Rosewater. Breen wrote Jack Warner that “we reviewed for a second time your picture Big Business and regret to inform you that we shall withhold the certificate of the Association until certain changes, requested in our letters upon the script, shall have been made.” The final film does display several very minor jump cuts, typically around the figure of Rosewater. One cut, made during one of Rosewater’s speeches about his beloved fabrics and colors, indicates that, as originally written and apparently shot, his character was once again pushing at the boundaries of how much pancy humor the filmmakers could get away with in the less friendly climate of 1936.

Nonetheless, given Rosewater’s completely dispensable role in the film’s narrative, one is left to wonder why his troublesome part remains in the film at all. One might note that he appears in the film’s key early boardroom sequence so that editing him out entirely might have entailed costly reshooting. He also exists, perhaps, to provide some levity to a hackneyed script that at times is a bit too serious for its own good. Guy Kibbee, a familiar Warners character player typically cast as comical sugar daddies, blowhards, blunderers, and Babbitts in pre-PCA films, is very unamusingly crotchety as the lead of this “B” film. (His illness during production and workdays of up to twelve and a half hours might have contributed to this.) More important, though, Rosewater is asked to serve the contradictory functions of providing amusement and an ideal for Trent—and by extension, audiences—to find distasteful. The remasculinization that the New Deal hoped to effect via federally funded art and confidence-building speeches found expression also in a cinema closely linked to government and big business policies. (It should be noted that Warner Bros. was the studio that most overtly sucked up to Roosevelt in the content of its films, but the tone of many post-PCA/New Deal films infiltrates the entire studio system.) The film ends with Trent surrounded by his loving family. His winning back of his business is linked to the heterosexual coupling of his daughter and his youthful inventor partner. Trent speaks of his planned first action once back on the job, and his response is the last spoken by a human character in the film: “Fire Mr. Rosewater.” Thus, the film’s ideological project comes to fruition. Old-fashioned values are back in play after America has paid for its sinful excesses (such as, for example, the Florida land rush boom of the late 1920s). The honest, hardworking man has used his own wits to regain control over his life, and he does this by ridding the system of frivolous affectation, reinstating a value system where “men are men.”

In The Big Noise, the queer man is shown precisely in order to be eliminated. Queerness, titillating but regulated, thus serves as a contrast and indeed a prop to heterosexual masculinity and all of the dominance and business success that it signifies.

The film, though, also suggests the still-nagging doubts that the lengthy Depression had by then firmly engendered in American culture. A running gag throughout the film has been the gab regularly spouted by the dry cleaning business’s mascot, a talkative parrot. Immediately after Trent speaks the last “human” bit of dialogue, there is actually one more line. The parrot gets the last word, repeating yet again his label for the cranky Trent: “Nice old man,” which causes the film’s hero to make a comical and disapproving face at the parrot as the end credit fades.
in. The parrot, whose high-pitched delivery might recall Rosewater's to some, thus leaves some doubt about the Depression-era man's credibility. It suggests that while the ideal “he” might be a “man,” he is also getting “old” and that he is also potentially “nice.” This word suggests that he might still be a bit “soft,” much like Rosewater himself; it also sardonically calls into question the brusque actions of a New Deal hero who ruthlessly tricks gangsters into killing each other.

**Conclusion.** This article has argued that queer imagery, as exemplified primarily by portrayals of effeminate “pansies” or fussy, “sissified” men and the mannish “New Woman” as lesbian, was more common during the Great Depression than has been previously cataloged. Queer imagery can be found in all types of U.S. cinema produced between the 1929 stock market crash and the United States' entry into World War II. Furthermore, this imagery was read as such by people at the time. Yet the stereotypical nature of many of these representations was not enough to make them “desirable” or even “safe” for many viewers. Indeed, many people were offended by their presence; the very existence of these images outweighed their still often negative connotations. Beyond that, queer imagery serves what I see as a refraction of the widespread gender crisis brought about by the Great Depression. Pansy and sissy representations of the period suggest and were read as a symbolic emasculation of the idealized male of U.S. patriarchy as a result of the socioeconomic crisis, while images of “mannish” women were a transposition of the threat of unmarried and/or working women. With pansy humor directly, and lesbian representation indirectly, negative reactions constituted a sexist response to notions of “weakness” often labeled “effeminacy” and coded as feminine.

What such stereotyping fitfully attempted to mask was that values culturally associated with women (keeping the family together, care for the needy, collective support, the pursuit of romance and other “sincere” pleasures, modesty, and gentleness combined with unheralded powers of endurance) came to the fore during the Depression. At the same time, a particular masculinist ethos of the 1920s (emphasizing individualism, aggressive competition, and material gain) fell apart. In the eyes of the Production Code Administration (and conservative religious and women’s groups), queerness was linked with the excesses and “sins” of the much-contested culture of the 1920s and the risk-taking decadence of money-grubbing mainstream entertainment. In a bigoted manner, it is also linked explicitly with urbanites and various ethnic and political minorities (especially Jews and communists). Queerness became a means to label members of a social group “unmanly,” “decadent,” or “anarchistic.” Nonetheless, queerness does not vanish even in the face of industry self-regulation because of the necessary role which it plays in public entertainment and other social performances, indeed within the very institutionalization of heterosexuality and patriarchy, whether as collective bonding or as weakness and perversion that must be shown in order to be ridiculed and rejected.

Robert Sklar has noted, “The historiographic issues of gender definition within specific societies and past cultural formations have barely been touched.” I would like to conclude by at least briefly suggesting a value for these images beyond what they tell us symptomatically about the gender crisis during the Depression, or
about the ironies and hypocrisies of censorship and homophobia. That is, 1930s cinema refracts, however indirectly, and certainly through the prism of homophobia, what queerness must have been like then. Of course Vito Russo is right to label films from this period, the Hollywood production and promotion apparatus, and U.S. culture itself as homophobic. Real-life queers of the Depression era and later periods viewed cinematic images that were largely caricatures, in which gays and lesbians were often presented as objects of ridicule and scorn.

Yet not all these images were necessarily homophobic, or at least not completely so. I don’t wish to equate fiction with reality, but I have occasionally noted how some gay and lesbian characters are treated with affection and even respect by others within the diegeses of individual films. Also, characters otherwise coded as nonqueer (e.g., Wheeler and Woolsey) seem at times to enjoy performing queerness. But what is more important is what queers in the 1930s might have made of such moments, how they might have honed the subtlety of their reading practices (a skill of life-and-death importance when it comes to meeting other gays) on these images. Perhaps they might have either laughed at such representations with a healthy critical distance or found some kind of comforting identification with them. However ridiculous the two men dancing arm in arm in Wonder Bar may have made closeted gay men in small towns feel once Al Jolson made the requisite wisecrack, that scene suggested that such people did exist. Andrea Weiss writes: “[In the 1930s] for a people who were striving toward self-knowledge, Hollywood stars became important models in the foundation of gay identity.”

Furthermore, we must not write off, in the name of a Russoesque righteous anger, the lived behaviorisms and self-identifying gestures of an earlier generation of queers. Russo claims not to mind sissiness in gay men, yet his stomach for it in terms of cinematic representation seems limited. If, as Jamie Gough has noted, the gay man has become more “masculinized” in his performance of gender roles with the increased mainstreaming of gay culture in the post-Stonewall period, one might look at cinema to bolster historical, sociological, and literary studies of how queer men were perhaps more “feminine”-acting before. And Chauncey has begun to make explicit for queer history the point that the most visible—if not the only—type of gay man early in the century was the obviously effeminate one. Lillian Faderman, meanwhile, writing about twentieth-century lesbianism, explores not only the “romantic friendship” between women but also the more butch aspects of transvestite women who sometimes even passed for men. Such claims broadly characterize an era and a “type of queer” that were actually “types of queers,” but it is crucial to see the historical, culturally specific nature of subjectivity. I prefer this approach to those, for instance, that try to theorize, often via ahistorical psychoanalytic methods, opposite gender-identified identities, analyses that sometimes simply suggest that gender is fluid and then leave things at that. If we are to find useful continuities—and disjunctures—within history, it might be better to place them more fully within the contextual terms of social production and reception, the interspsychic, and consequently the historico-political.

Historical studies of a period that parallels our own in so many ways reveal continuities as we see how queer representation, both then and now, is at once
“not too dangerous” in providing a few “harmless” laughs involving, say, a cross-dressing comedian, and yet also a boundary case when it comes to questions of censorship. The government, our culture’s social structure, and the military use the question of queerness with respect to NEA grants, the suitability of TV’s heroines, and eligibility to serve in the U.S. armed forces. (Indeed, the latter demonstrates how the regulation and exclusion of queerness is still constitutive of national identity.) In his 1998 essay “No Sex, Please. We’re Gay,” Village Voice critic Richard Goldstein briefly refers to the 1930s when he notes that, in recent years, “the celluloid closet has become a room with a view. As the roster of this year’s Oscar contenders attests, gay characters are nearly as ubiquitous as aliens at the cineplex, and for the most part, they are lovable, even noble souls.” But, he adds, there is “a high price to pay for respectability,” namely, that “these queer figments of the Hollywood imagination have no sex lives... In the latest spate of Hollywood films, gays are about as chaste as Franklin Pangborn was.”

I agree fully with Goldstein’s evaluation of the limitations and oppressions of contemporary Hollywood liberalism, although I might quibble with his contention that the queers of yore were presented as, or read as, chaste and, by extension, “harmless.” For one, this reading projects contemporary notions of sexual orientation into an era when gender behavior rather than object choice was the marker of queerness. But even with respect to desire, one need only see Franklin Pangborn with an onscreen boyfriend in Only Yesterday (1933), disconcerting a homophobic businessman yet hitting it off with the man’s butch wife in Turnabout (1940), or admiring Johnny Weismuller’s chest in Stage Door Canteen (1943) to realize that, in his time, Pangborn’s screen persona was far from chaste and did have the power to offend. Besides, in the realm of the cinema, in which fantasies meet realities on the projected horizon of the sociopolitical, Pangborn and company were clearly/queerly many things to many people.

Notes

   For more general studies of women in the Depression, see Susan Ware, Holding Their Own: American Women in the 1930s (Boston: Twayne, 1982), and Lois Scharf, To Work and to Wed: Female Unemployment, Feminism, and the Great Depression (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1980).
3. Within cinema studies scholarship, both E. Ann Kaplan and Robin Wood have read as lesbian Cunningham’s small role as the hotel manager who tips off Helen Faraday (Marlene Dietrich) about the detective pursuing her in Blonde Venus (1932). See Kaplan, “Fetishism and the Repression of Motherhood in Von Sternberg’s Blonde

Cinema Journal 38, No. 2, Winter 1999


5. See, for example, Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America (New York: Knopf, 1985), especially the last chapter, addressing female sexuality and subjectivity through the mid-1930s.


7. Chauncey, Gay New York, 18. Chauncey also notes that the word “gay” had homosexual connotations even then.


9. On the innuendo of this offer of gay matchmaking, see Richard Barrios, A Song in the Dark: The Birth of the Musical Film (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 432. My thanks to Richard for pointing out this scene to me.


13. Indeed, Citizen Kane is but one of many canonical, much-analyzed texts within cinema studies that simply cries out for a queer reading. On one level, the film is, after all, a study of failed heterosexuality. Besides my “outing” of Thatcher and two of the guardians of his image, recall Noël Carroll’s observation that “rosebud” is a gay slang expression for the anus. See Carroll, “Interpreting Citizen Kane,” Persistence of Vision 7 (1989): 61.


19. Ibid.

21. See Doty’s use of the very apt phrase “the closet of connotation” and his critique of the heterosexism of close textual analysis in his introduction to Making Things Perfectly Queer. My aim, following Doty, is to queer precisely such reading practices.

22. I claim that the PCA, although homophobic, was nonetheless producing queer readings; on what makes a reading queer, see Doty, Making Things Perfectly Queer, intro. and chap. 1. Among the many PCA files held by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS) in which censors cite queerness or other “sexual perversion(s)” in films and either warn producers about it or ask that it be removed are those files on films including Just Imagine, Charley’s Aunt (both 1930), The Front Page (1931), Blessed Event, Hell’s Highway, The Kid from Spain, Lawyer Man, The Sign of the Cross (all 1932), Blood Money, Circus Clown, Design for Living, Diplomaniacs, Fast Workers, International House, Little Giant, Only Yesterday, Our Betters, Queen Christina, Son of a Sailor, So This Is Africa (all 1933), Dr. Monica, The Gay Divorcee, Myrt and Marge (mentioned in the file for Roman Scandals), One More River, Wonder Bar (all 1934), Barbary Coast, The Flame Within, Roberta, Top Hat (all 1935), The Big Noise, The Bold Caballero, Dracula’s Daughter, Follow the Fleet, Swing Time, Sylvia Scarlett (all 1936), Hollywood Hotel, The Life of Emile Zola (both 1937), Vivacious Lady, Up the River (both 1938), The Bank Dick, Turnabout (both 1940), Love Crazy, In the Navy (both 1941), and Lady in the Dark (1944). Thanks to the helpful and supportive staff of the AMPAS library.

23. Martin, Hollywood’s Movie Commandments, 42.


26. America seems obsessed with pinning down the percentage of the population that can be labeled “gay,” “lesbian,” “bisexual,” or “queer.” Antiquque protesters at the 1993 march for queer rights in Washington proudly displayed signs stating “Only 1%”—as if the size of any minority should be considered when civil rights are the issue. A study claiming that the U.S. queer population, at 1 percent, is smaller than hitherto believed is documented in Edward O. Laumann et al., The Social Organization of Sexuality (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), and in Michael Gagnon, Laumann, and Gina Kolata, Sex in America: A Definitive Survey (Boston: Little, Brown, 1994). The survey has been critiqued, and the surveyors admit that they had a smaller than ideal pool of openly gay interviewees and that other subjects might have been unwilling to admit homosexual encounters. Write-ups about queerness in society include those in Details, June 1993; New York, June 20, 1994; Newsweek, September 14, 1993; U.S. News & World Report, October 17, 1994. Of the many articles on the coming out of both Ellen DeGeneres and her character Ellen, see Entertainment Weekly, October 4, 1996. Printed when audiences were still speculating on the orientation of both actor and character, it is one of many pieces that includes a survey, poll, or statistics. Little has changed from the days of Kinsey or, for that matter, the nineteenth-century sexologists. On DeGeneres, see also Time, April 14, 1997; People, May 5, 1997; Out, May 1997.

27. Malby, “‘Baby Face,’” 25.

see Elizabeth Young, “Here Comes the Bride: Wedding Race and Gender in Bride of Frankenstein,” Feminist Studies 17, no. 3 (Fall 1991): 403–37.


32. For a fine study of early sound comedy, see Henry Jenkins, What Made Pistachio Nuts?: Early Sound Comedy and the Vaudeville Aesthetic (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992). Jenkins frequently refers to gender play found in what he calls the “anarchistic comedy” of Cantor, the Marx Brothers, and others in the period whose “last great gasp” (280) came, not surprisingly, in 1934. He discusses the transgressive aspects of female “comedian comedy” in chap. 9 and is most explicit about male homoeroticism in considering the sexual ambiguity of Wheeler and Woolsey, 201–2. Wheeler and Woolsey’s most queer period is between 1930 and 1934, but even the later, post-PCA Mummy’s Boys (1936) is liberally peppered with their patented cross-dressing antics and pansy humor. For a study focused on the most famous male-male couple of them all, see Jonathan Sanders, Another Fine Dress: Role-Play in the Films of Laurel and Hardy (New York: Cassell, 1995).


34. Dominick LaCapra, History and Criticism (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 141.


37. PCA file, Diplomaniacs, AMPAS, letters, Wingate to Hays, April 24, 1933, and Wingate to RKO’s Merian C. Cooper, April 22, 1933.

38. See SRC censor Jason Joy’s letter to Joseph Breen, December 15, 1931: “With crime practically denied them, with box office figures down, with high pressure methods being employed back home to spur the studios on to get a little more cash, it was almost inevitable that sex, as the nearest thing at hand and pretty generally sure fire, should be seized on. It was.” PCA file, Possessed, AMPAS. Also quoted in Vasey, World According to Hollywood, 123.


40. See the PCA files for both The Invisible Man, which contain discussions about single lines of dialogue, and for Only Yesterday, which include the correspondence quoted; AMPAS.

Cinema Journal 38, No. 2, Winter 1999
41. Whale's films, highly theatrical, filled with deliberately campy gallow humor, sporting many queer characters, and often surprisingly critical of and resistant to heterosexual coupling at their close, are, like those of George Cukor and Dorothy Arzner, ripe for queer auteurist analysis. Doty discusses Cukor and Arzner, begins the above reading of Whale, arguably classical Hollywood's most openly gay director, and calls for further work. I have begun to oblige with "A World Made of Plaster of Paris: Theatricality and Queerness in the Cinema of James Whale," paper presented at the Society for Cinema Studies conference, Ottawa, 1997, a blueprint for a book-length project on Whale I am pursuing. The place of theatricality in gay identity and life earlier in the century is well argued; see not only Chauncey, Gay New York, but Dyer, ed., Gays and Film (London: BFI, 1977). Also, Joseph Litvak sees anticipatory queer gestures within such performative tropes; see his Caught in the Act: Theatricality in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).


44. My thanks to the late William K. (Bill) Everson for these insights.

45. See the editions of the Motion Picture Annual published by Quigley Publications, which was headed by the same Quigley who was so instrumental in implementing the Production Code.

46. Ware, Holding Their Own, 185.


48. Although it might seem odd lumping Chatterton in with sexagenarian Dressler and Arliss, the former was a romantic “glamor” star of the period, a highly unusual role for a woman over thirty-five starting a star reign in Hollywood. The same applies to the unique voice of Mae West, forty years old at the time of her first film, Night after Night (1932).

49. As Vasey argues, Hollywood was interested in “foreign” voices not merely to interest domestic audiences but to woo spectators worldwide. Also, foreign governments often used their economic clout to curb Hollywood’s more egregious ethnic types; see Vasey, “Foreign Parts: Hollywood’s Global Distribution and the Representation of Ethnicity,” in Francis Couvares, ed., Movie Censorship and American Culture (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), 212–36. See also Vasey, World According to Hollywood, 122, 146.

50. Barrios, Song in the Dark, 289.

51. For example, there are no complaints about Marlene Dietrich’s famous same-sex kiss in the PCA file on Morocco (1930); one should note, though, that calls to “clean up” would intensify later.

52. See, for example, the PCA files on Only Yesterday and Sylvia Scarlett, AMPAS.

53. PCA files on Queen Christina, Wonder Bar, So This Is Africa, and Turnabout, AMPAS.

54. The PCA was also concerned about illicit heterosexuality between the vampire and her aide. PCA file, Dracula’s Daughter, AMPAS; see also the pressbook and promotional materials at the Billy Rose Theater and Film Collection, Lincoln Center Library, New York; and Rhona J. Berenstein’s fine Attack of the Leading Ladies: Gender.

55. What with the presence of gay director Whale at Universal as well, the studio, presided over by Carl Laemmle but actually run by his very young son, Carl Jr., must have been a very queer-friendly place indeed. On The Loves of Women and a proposed Columbia film, Strange Passage, which was to have dealt with “rape, perversion and prostitution,” see such PCA files as the one for Broadway thru a Keyhole. Letter, Joseph Breen to Will Hays, July 28, 1935.


57. PCA file, The Sign of the Cross, AMPAS.

58. Maltby, “Production Code,” 40; also quotes Jacobs, Wages of Sin. See also in particular Vasey, World According to Hollywood, chaps. 4 and 5; the term “contradictory cinematic evidence” is on 128.

59. PCA file, International House, AMPAS.

60. An example of the use of the word “lavender” occurs in The Broadway Melody (1929) in which a sardonic woman notes to a musical’s pansey costume designer that if he had designed the doors to the theater, “they’d have been done in lavender.” Similarly, Wheeler and Woolsey, in Hips, Hips Hooray (1934), are trying out the taste of flavored lipsticks by kissing women wearing each flavor. At one point a woman steps out of the way and the boys kiss each other, leading Woolsey to dismiss the flavor as “lavender . . . and old lace.”


63. On Times Square bus stops as well-known “cruising” space, see Chauncey, Gay New York, 18. On Bringing Up Baby, see Russo, Celluloid Closet, 47.

64. Maltby, “Production Code,” 41.


66. See interview material in the feature documentary Paul Cadmus: Enfant Terrible at 80 (1984), in which he reads the bigoted response his work received. Cadmus also gives an example of the ironic failures of censorship when he notes that he owed the start of his career to the publicity his work received when a Navy admiral tried to suppress his work.

67. A number of useful studies have already begun to make these connections. On links among the Jew and other “categories,” such as the leftist, the intellectual, and the queer, see Tom Poe, “‘Disinfecting Hollywood’: The Cultural Logics of ‘Dirk’ in the Rhetoric of the Catholic Legion of Decency,” paper presented at the Society for Cinema Studies conference, Syracuse, 1994. For an analysis of Cantor along these lines, see Hank Sartin, “Eddie Cantor, the Pansy Craze of the Early 1930s, and the Intersection of Jewish and Gay Stereotypes,” paper presented at the Society for Cinema Studies conference, New York, 1995. Sartin especially notes the stereotyped “weakness” of the “abnormal” homosexual and the “hypochondriac” Jew; see also Mosse, Image of Man, for historical connections in Europe between anti-Semitism and homophobia in

Cinema Journal 38, No. 2, Winter 1999

68. See interview with Rhodes in the TV documentary about RKO, Hollywood: The Golden Years; episode two, “Let’s Face the Music and Dance,” is on the Ginger Rogers/Fred Astaire musicals.

69. The PCA did not directly link Jewishness with queerness, but it was concerned that a scene of book burning in the film might be too “suggestive of recent activities in Germany.” Such a scene, the PCA felt, might be suggestive of “propaganda.” The PCA also suggested eliminating the word “revolution” from the script and gave attention to such aristocratic and military figures as Bienfaissance, Major D’Albeville, and Paty D’Clan, whose “foppish” appearances could connote that they were “panses.” Given the complaints by the PCA and the U.S. Navy over a queer scene involving sailors in Follow the Fleet the year before, the PCA’s conservative politics regarding military and national images, anti-Semitism, the desire not to provoke Germany, and censoring queerness all intermingle. Breen did, however, write to Warner Bros. to praise the film, which he found “magnificent.” PCA file, The Life of Emile Zola, AMPAS.

70. Chauncey, Gay New York, especially chap. 12.

71. PCA file, Top Hat, AMPAS.


73. Quoted in Russo, Celluloid Closet, 34. See also the clipping file on Pangborn at AMPAS.


75. For a consideration of hegemonic ideological intermeshing of the New Deal, the image of President Franklin Roosevelt, the Hollywood studio system, and, to a lesser extent, the developing trajectory of classical Hollywood narrative, see Giuliana Muscio, Hollywood’s New Deal (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997). I find it significant that the election of FDR corresponds with Hollywood’s peak moment of crisis and that the enactment of his New Deal closely parallels the founding and development of the PCA.

76. Script materials and other documentation for The Big Noise are in Warner Bros. Archive, USC Arts Special Collections, Doheny Library.

77. Letter, Joseph I. Breen to Jack Warner, February 12, 1936, PCA file, The Big Noise, AMPAS.

78. Letter, Breen to Warner, March 24, 1936, PCA file, The Big Noise, AMPAS.

79. I borrow the term “remasculinization” from Susan Jeffords, who uses it to speak of post–Vietnam War attempts by the mass culture to represent machismo (e.g., Rambo) as a way to bolster patriarchy in light of U.S. losses. See her The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

80. This article focuses only on the writings of the PCA. Film critics and publicists of the period also produced queer readings, not all of them necessarily homophobic. See my “‘A Treatise on Decay’: Leftist Critics and Their Queer Readings of Depression-Era U.S. Cinema,” paper presented at Society for Cinema Studies conference, San Diego, 1998.


