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Race, Gender, and Film Censorship in Virginia, 1922-1965

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Chapter One

Movie Censorship and Virginia

An Introduction

In 1806, Richmond entrepreneurs built the city's first theater, known initially as the New Theater, at the present-day junction of Thirteenth and Broad streets. This theater was likely the first in Virginia, and Richmonders of all colors, classes, and genders attended, although a three-tiered system of seating and ticket pricing separated attendees by race and class. Wealthy white patrons paid a dollar or more to sit in upper-floor boxes thoroughly separated from the rest of the audience. Their middle- and working-class counterparts paid two or three quarters for bench seating near the orchestra. For a quarter or less, the city's poorest citizens, people of color both free and slave, and white women alone in public, who would have been perceived as prostitutes, filled the theater's pit and upper-most galleries.¹ On the night of December 26, 1811, over 600 patrons, including Virginia's governor, George W. Smith, crowded into the theater. During that night's performance, a fire broke out, killing seventy-two people. Of the dead, forty-six were well-dressed, upper-class, white women, who had either been caught in the upper-tiers of the theater's boxes in cumbersome dresses or killed by the stampeding crowd. In comparison, only six white men perished. Twenty African Americans died, sixteen men and four women.² Each theatergoer's class, race, and gender dictated the space he or she occupied in the theater that night and thus determined his or her likelihood of leaving the theater alive. While the advent of cinema would not reach Virginia for another century, the space of the movie theater would still be stratified by class, race, and gender—and in less fluid ways, as legal racial segregation pushed black moviegoers entirely out of white spaces or relegated them to the balconies with separate entrances where their presence would be rendered least visible to white attendees. And

once patrons took their seats, the images they saw, especially of African Americans and white women, would be regulated as well, at first locally, and by 1922, by a state board of motion picture censorship.

At its most basic level, this study analyzes the history of Virginia's Board of Movie Censorship, which existed from 1922 to 1966. It utilizes the contestations surrounding film censorship as a framework for more fully understanding the dominant political, economic, and cultural hierarchies that structured life in mid-twentieth century Virginia and ways in which Virginians contested or supported such structures. In particular, this work highlights the centrality of gendered and racialized discourses to debates over the movies and the broader regulatory power of the state. It emphasizes ways in which issues related to race, gender, and sexuality framed debates over popular culture in a New South state. The study also ties the regulation of racial and sexual boundaries in other areas, such as public facilities, schools, public transportation, the voting booth, and residential housing, to how censors sought to define and regulate those same boundaries in popular culture.

Historical studies of popular culture and its regulation have largely centered on the Northeast, in particular the hub of New York City, and the West Coast with Hollywood nestled in its hills. Works that explore popular culture in the South are few, and they often dwell on specific films, books, or events in popular culture that seek to represent or speak about the South, such as the films *The Birth of a Nation* and *Gone with the Wind*. Also, most works focus almost exclusively on urban areas. Virginia was not urban in the 1920s—or in the 1960s. The story of Virginia's regulation of popular culture must take into account that its rural citizens did not have easy access to the movies, and regulation of films shown at remote, rural theaters would be haphazard at best if distributors decided to skirt the censors' decisions. Thus this study of state film censorship and Virginians' varying degrees of support for and contestation over the regulation of popular culture not only offers a study of popular culture in a non-urban Southern state, but it also adds to and complicates existing narratives in relation to the New South's political and economic histories from the 1920s to the 1960s as it seeks to add the regulation of popular culture as another key way in which white elites sought to harness the power of the state to buttress their own political and economic goals.

This work emphasizes the importance of tying the history of popular culture in a region not known as a prolific entertainment hub to corresponding and overarching narratives of New South politics, economic boosterism, and racial segregation. It uncovers how individuals interacted and what they viewed in their leisure time and why legislators in Virginia took an active interest in regulating what moviegoers saw on film. The censorship board, as a regulatory arm of the state, came to act in tandem with other state bodies to pursue policies of regulating African American men and women, white women, and other populations deemed "vulnerable" in the realm of popular

culture to coincide with and buttress ways in which those same groups faced regulation in other areas of residential, political, and economic life. But first, the very power of the movies to articulate different viewpoints and ways of living clearly presented a threat to some powerful Virginians and the state's established hierarchies in the early twentieth century, and that threat, whether perceived or real, was only exacerbated by the fact that once the movies arrived en masse, Virginians rushed to see them.

GOING TO THE MOVIES IN VIRGINIA

By the early 1920s, 20,000 commercial spaces nationwide showed movies at least one night a week.³ Over six hundred theaters operated on the "race movie" circuit alone, which catered specifically to viewers of color.⁴ In 1925, moviegoers nationwide purchased fifty million tickets per week, and weekly ticket sales topped ninety million by 1929.⁵ In 1920s Richmond, new picture palaces, which seated well over a thousand patrons, boomed along downtown's Theater Row, but no such palaces were built for African American audiences.⁶ Instead, five modest theaters, three in Jackson Ward and two on Hull Street, served the city's black population.⁷ By the mid-1920s, three hundred movie theaters operated throughout Virginia, and roughly ten percent of those theaters catered to African Americans. By 1930, however, with the combined stress of the Depression and the "talkies" (movies with sound), one-third of those 300 theaters had closed their doors.⁸ The total number of all theaters in Virginia numbered two hundred by then, and only twenty theaters remained to serve African Americans across the state, including two in Richmond.⁹ By the mid-1930s, however, theater construction was again on the rise, but the type and location of theater building shifted. At least seventeen new theaters opened in the Richmond area during the mid- to late 1930s to replace theaters that had closed earlier in the decade, but builders no longer constructed these new theaters downtown, and seating capacity no longer reached above one thousand. Instead, owners began to place theaters outside of the city center in local neighborhood suburbs and significantly scaled-down seating capacity.¹⁰

Yet Richmond boasted as many theaters at the onset of World War II as it did in the 1920s, and movie going thrived after the Second World War. By the early 1950s, however, movie ticket sales waned as televisions entered the nation's homes. In 1950s Richmond, about thirty theaters were in operation, a number equal to previous decades, although drive-ins now accounted for one-third of those theaters.¹¹ Roughly one-quarter of the city's theaters closed by the end of the 1950s, and unlike in the 1920s and 1930s, no new theaters opened to replace them. In the early 1960s, nearly a dozen theaters permanently shut their doors; by the mid-1960s, less than a dozen theaters

remained in Richmond.¹² It is across this rise and fall of the movies as the culturally dominant form of mass visual popular entertainment from the 1920s to the 1960s that the work of the Virginia's censors mediated what audiences would see when they went to the movies.

THE WORK OF THE CENSORS

In the 1910s, Virginians joined the throngs of Americans streaming into nickelodeon, vaudeville, and motion picture theaters. Richmond alone supported two locally published magazines devoted to motion pictures.¹³ Although the censorship of films by a state-supported board of authorities was still nearly a decade away, state and city officials already policed the boundaries of cinema. In 1914, Richmond police chief Werner stopped the exhibition of *The Vampire* at two city theaters after the president of Richmond's United Daughters of the Confederacy chapter complained to the chief of the film's indecency.¹⁴ By the mid-1910s, an informal committee had been created in Richmond to view newly released films that addressed sexuality, and it banned a small number of films from the city and deleted scenes from others by using the authority of the police to confiscate films deemed potentially disruptive to public order.¹⁵ But such censorship was carried out on an ad hoc, infrequent, and informal basis. It was not until 1922 that Virginia's General Assembly members voted to establish a formal censorship board to screen and license movies for exhibition in Virginia. The censorship board served as a form of cultural regulation to complement political and economic controls that Virginia's officials used to maintain hierarchies of race, gender, and class and that Virginians contested and negotiated on a daily basis. As time progressed, individual citizens and organizations continued to renegotiate and challenge the boundaries of censorship until the board disbanded in the mid-1960s.

Upon the censorship board's establishment in 1922, the governor appointed three individuals to the board, and they viewed every film seeking exhibition in Virginia from 1922 until 1965.¹⁶ The work of the censorship board was quite standard. Any film that a motion picture distributor wished to legally show at a movie theater in Virginia had to apply for an exhibition license from the censors. If the board approved a film, a seal of approval would appear in one of the movie's opening frames.¹⁷ At least two board members viewed each film, with the third member consulted if the initial two screeners disagreed on a licensing decision, but most board decisions throughout the years were unanimous. Furthermore, censors most commonly either fully approved or outright rejected a film. It was often only after a film's distributor contested a censorship ruling that the board viewed the film a second time and offered specific cuts of scenes and dialogue that would,

with their elimination, ensure the movie's approval. During its first year of existence, the board viewed 1,840 films and in the following four years, it screened between 1,678 and 1,816 films per year, an average that remained consistent throughout the board's existence. The censors viewed a total of 8,843 films during its first five years of operation, and required a total of 1,954 cuts to 1,478 scenes and 476 subtitles.¹⁸ Yet the number of films rejected in full was small: censors rejected sixteen films completely during this time period, and they later approved nine of those rejected films after distributors made significant changes to the films.¹⁹ This study will interrogate what it meant for censors to rework these films before their release for public consumption, and why they chose to censor the films and scenes that they did.

Despite the state-sanctioned structure for approving films, the policing of films in Virginia occurred erratically. The censors used a variety of tactics to root out and censor problematic films. In addition to the official screening process, the state attempted to scrutinize film content through a number of informal methods. In some cases, individual film viewers wrote the censorship board and described in detail the scenes that they found problematic, often tipping off the censors to possibly illegal material being shown in a film. Throughout the existence of the board, the censors also recruited volunteers to view movies in their respective locales throughout Virginia by soliciting Assembly members for names of citizens in their districts who might want to serve as volunteers. This method of recruitment inevitably ensured that these volunteers would be white and middle-class. The state did not compensate these volunteers, who viewed at least two movies per month and received two free movie passes to do so. It appears that the board allowed them to select which movies they wished to view in their choice of theater. The theater manager, upon receiving the pass, then sent it to the censorship board so that the board could track whether its recruits were indeed going to the movies. Recruiting volunteers was a constant problem for the board though; it continually solicited for additional help in monitoring the movies.

Movie distributors and theater managers faced a sliding scale of fines for showing films illegally in Virginia. Distributors who were repeat offenders faced the possibility of having all of their future productions banned in Virginia, although the board appears to have only used this tactic as a threat and never actually employed it. If film distributors wished to appeal a censorship decision, they typically asked the board to re-screen the film. The board usually obliged, and sometimes opened the screenings of particularly controversial films to other community leaders and politicians. Often, representatives of the movie's production or distribution company would visit the censors in an effort to further persuade them to license their fare. If the censors persisted in barring the film, the distributors could sue the board through the Richmond Circuit court.