Deconstructing the “Low Other” in the First Wave of Sex Hygiene Films (1914-1919)

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Abstract

The present thesis investigates the commercial sex hygiene films produced between the years 1914 and 1919 in the United States, during the last years of the Progressive Era. Rejected and prohibited as soon as five years after their apparition, the sex hygiene films’ position within the industry, as well as the cinematic techniques they incorporated, will be analysed through the concept of the Low Other. The first part of the thesis aims to delineate the used concepts, as well as integrate the sex hygiene film into a wider cultural, social, and political framework. The second part explores the films’ aesthetic construction, then focuses on a textual analysis of the narrative and non-narrative methods implied by three particular sex hygiene films. Finally, the thesis concludes that the films used a series of cinematic methods to create a Low Other on-screen, yet these very methods ultimately played a part within their suppression as a Low Other body of culture.

Keywords

Early cinema, sex hygiene film, Low Other, Damaged Goods, The Black Stork, The End of The Road, venereal disease film, sex education film, eugenics, transgression, hybridization, Progressive Era.
Contents

Introduction ................................................................................................................................................. 1

Research Questions and Aims ...................................................................................................................... 4
Importance, Material, Methodology ............................................................................................................. 6
Disposition of Thesis ................................................................................................................................. 12

Theoretical and Historical Framework ..................................................................................................... 14

The Politics and Poetics of Transgression .................................................................................................. 14
The Repugnance and Fascination of the Low Other .................................................................................. 16
The Process of Fabricating a Low Other .................................................................................................... 18
The Low Other and Progressivism ............................................................................................................ 22
The Low Other, Puritanism, and Sexuality ................................................................................................. 25

The Construction of the Low Other in the Sex Hygiene Film ................................................................. 31

A Cinema of Attractions ............................................................................................................................. 32
A Cinema of Medical Footage and Documentary ....................................................................................... 34
A Cinema of Education and Entertainment ................................................................................................. 36

Damaged Goods (1914, 1915): A Progressivist Phenomenon ................................................................. 41

The Black Stork (1917): A Multiplicity of Discourse ................................................................................. 47
The End of the Road (1919): An Inverted Hierarchy .................................................................................. 53

A Final Reflection ......................................................................................................................................... 58

Conclusion .................................................................................................................................................. 61

Bibliography ............................................................................................................................................... 64
Introduction

On October 2\textsuperscript{nd}, 1915, the trade publication \textit{The Moving Picture World} published a series of testimonials following the second release of \textit{Damaged Goods} (American Film Manufacturing Company, 1915), a sex hygiene picture dealing with the effects of venereal disease. A spokesperson for The Child Hygiene Committee declared that "\textit{Damaged Goods} is a true and pure delineation of a social disease and its far-reaching effects on public and personal health."

A clergy representative stated that "[t]he play clearly portrays the ravages and influences of dreaded diseases and shows the great need for serious work to be done for their prevention," and a \textit{Hearst's Magazine} editorial read: "I would wish to take a young boy and girl of mine to see this play [...] if they could get harm out of it, I confess I do not understand how."\textsuperscript{1} In the same \textit{Moving Picture World} issue, a reviewer described it as "not a problem play catering to the morbid but a genuine tragedy. As such it surely is entitled to take its place in the film literature of the day."\textsuperscript{2} The sex hygiene film’s redistribution, after its initial premiere in 1914, was hence being greeted with a \textit{mélange} of medical, clerical, and journalistic approval.

Four years later, however, \textit{The Film Daily} announced that "the U.S. Public Health Service has withdrawn its endorsement of the sex hygiene pictures \textit{The End of The Road} [American Social Hygiene Association, Famous Players-Lasky Corporation, 1919], \textit{Fit to Win} [Medical Department of the Army, 1919], and \textit{Open Your Eyes} [Warner Bros., State Health Films Inc., 1919]."\textsuperscript{3} The same year, \textit{Exhibitor's Trade Review} disclosed that the publication "will hereafter accept neither advertising nor publicity concerning any picture dealing with venereal disease or sex hygiene, which is intended for commercial exploitation in the theatres of the United States before mixed audiences in the manner of dramatic productions."\textsuperscript{4} As Eric Schaefer also underlines in his "Of Hygiene and Hollywood," within a very short timeframe, publications had turned from fully supporting the first American wave of sex health films to sharply dismissing it.\textsuperscript{5} What’s more, the reaction against venereal disease pictures arched over the entire industry – as such, The Thirteen Points or Standards were submitted by the National

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\textsuperscript{1} "A Vital Drama of Moral Uplift," \textit{Moving Picture World} 26, no. 1 (2 October, 1915), 99.


\textsuperscript{3} "Government No Longer Endorses Certain Disease Films," \textit{The Film Daily} 9, no. 34 (4 August 1919), 1.

\textsuperscript{4} "To Whom It May Concern," \textit{The Exhibitor’s Trade Review} (6 September, 1919), 1193.

Association of Motion Pictures (NAMPI) in 1919, adopted in 1921, and prohibited the depiction of “immoral” content such as venereal disease, birth control, abortion, sex, alcohol use, white slavery and other topics considered improper. Self-censorship efforts eradicated the above-mentioned subjects from the mainstream, but simultaneously led to their relocation into a new, separate industry that tackled the “forbidden” topics Hollywood did not want to be associated with any longer. The birth of the “exploitation” industry is thus generally located by the very few scholars who approach the subject around the year 1919. Aiming to distance itself from the works that combine the discussion on sex hygiene pictures with that on exploitation cinema, the present thesis will only address the sex health films created by the mainstream industry between 1914 and 1919, referring to them as “the first wave of sex hygiene films.” In this proposed nomenclature, the sex health films produced by the exploitation industry subsequent to 1919 would be “the second wave of sex hygiene pictures.” However, when one decides to maintain focus on the premier category, one first question naturally arises: what could have happened in such a short period of time that influenced such a dramatic shift in perception? Why were sex hygiene pictures dismissed by the mainstream commercial system five years after their initial release?

It is true that, by openly addressing taboos such as sexual desire and venereal disease, and by drawing a connection between these and the lower classes, the sex hygiene film placed itself in an uneasy relationship with puritan mores. Nevertheless, as its appearance was fueled

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6 For the complete list of prohibited topics see: Jonathon Green and Nicholas J. Karolides, Encyclopedia of Censorship (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 2005), 373.
8 In major studio nomenclature, “exploitation” meant only the process of advertising that accompanied a film’s theatrical release. But during the beginning of the 1920s, the term “exploitation” started simultaneously defining a distinct way of producing budget cinema, whose products also needed “exploitation advertising” in order to attract an audience. The exploitation industry focused on quick profits rather than aesthetic value, and produced extremely low-budget materials with prohibited topics so as to attract patrons. Characterized by recycling techniques, constant reuse of material, frequent lack of credits, and overall illegality, the exploitation industry has been named as such as it inscribes into a completely different production system than the mainstream one. Young girls who find themselves in trouble, alcohol and drug use, nudity, sex, and young motherhood, were all frequent subjects in the 1920s exploitation movie, and they too were derived from the 1914 to 1919 sex hygiene films. These have all been carefully researched by Eric Schaefer, who has written extensively on the distinct production and exhibition methods of exploitation as an industry surviving at the margins. Eric Schaefer, Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!: A History of Exploitation Films, 1919-1959 (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001). Eric Schaefer, “Resisting Refinement: The Exploitation Film and Self-Censorship,” Film History 6, No. 3 (Autumn 1994): 293-313. Felicia Feaster and Bret Wood, Forbidden Fruit: The Golden Age of the Exploitation Film (Baltimore, MD: Midnight Marquee Press, 1999).
9 I have chosen to separate the sex hygiene films into two distinct “waves,” as they are two groups of movies made under different circumstances and with different goals. The ones before 1919 were made for educational and propagandistic purposes, as it will be analysed further in this thesis, whereas the ones produced in the 1920s and later, as Schaefer demonstrates, were aimed at displaying a taboo topic so as quickly earn a profit. Schaefer, Bold!, 4-6, 38.
by the dominant Progressivist ideology, a belief in science momentarily absorbed the puritan inhibition towards veiled discourses on sex. Indeed, when describing the evolution of representations of sexual acts in film, Linda Williams names the relationship between American cinema and the display of sex a “prolonged adolescence.” Within this adolescence, she states, the explicit portrayal of sex was often elided and, as a result, often wondered about. As she emphasizes the double meaning of the verb “to screen” as both revelation and concealment, she writes:

[t]o screen is to reveal on a screen. But a second, equally important meaning, as the dictionary reads, is ‘to shelter or protect with or as a screen.’ Movies both reveal and conceal. If the history of moving-image entertainment is one of a general tendency toward revelation, of a greater graphic imagination of sex, we must keep the stress on imagination.

The sex hygiene film partook in this extended puberty of mainstream cinema, and while its declared purpose was the education – not the titillation – of masses, sex was represented not through itself, but through its effects. These, in turn, were to be feared and condemned because, as Georges Bataille once wrote, “[u]nless the taboo is observed with fear it lacks the counterpoise of desire which gives its deepest significance.” Hence, imagination was the place where sexual desire convened with the element of fear. Oscillating between revelation and concealment, fear and desire, education and imagination, the mainstream and the margins, the sex hygiene film contains a great number of oppositional discourses about sex and the ones who have it. Michel Foucault underlined that as long as there exists discourse about sex, however, one should first analyse “who does the speaking, the positions and viewpoints from which they speak, the institutions which prompt people to speak about it.”

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12 Ibid.
Research Questions and Aims

At this point, it is important to underline that the ambition of the present thesis is to interrogate the first wave of sex hygiene films through the concept of the “Low Other” as forwarded by Peter Stallybrass and Allon White in relation to literary genres and the carnival. This decision is based on several reasons. The first one is the authors’ contention that there exists a hierarchy of “high” and “low” in culture that reflects and reinforces the hierarchy between social classes. And that within this set of hierarchies the more powerful side rejects the other so as to reinforce its dominance. The second reason is that the concept of “high” and “low” is also in accord with the ideology of the Progressive Era that gave birth to the sex hygiene movie, in which both class and race distinctions were heavily encouraged. As Progressivism witnessed the advance of cinema as a vehicle of moral enlightenment, scientific reason, and education, the sex hygiene film was created as an ideological tool to educate masses about the dangers of venereal disease allegedly permeating from the lower classes. Films that delivered a discourse about sexual education, hygiene pictures were simultaneously rooted in a Progressive class doctrine.

Indeed, the few scholars that approach, even in passing, the subject of early sex health films, argue that these underlyingly portrayed the lower classes as the initial carriers of disease. Both Eric Schaefer and Annette Kuhn posit from a contemporary point of view that the sex hygiene film was deepening class segregation, making veiled assumptions that the working class was to blame for the spread of illness. They heel on historian of medicine Allan M. Brandt’s history of venereal disease and recounting of medical, military, and public health responses arisen throughout the period to reflect their own assumption about the latent scope of

16 Ibid, 2-5.
17 Thomas C. Leonard, “Eugenics and Economics in the Progressive Era,” Journal of Economic Perspectives 19, No. 4 (Fall, 2005): 209-212. For more on the subject of Progressivism and race see: David W. Southern, The Progressive Era and Race: Reaction and Reform, 1900-1917 (Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, 2005). It is to be noted that some historians, such as Shelton Stromquist, underlined that class distinctions were only involuntarily encouraged. He writes that the Progressives’ goal was the eradication of such notions of class and race, and ultimately wished for equality between all individuals. Counterintuitively, they simultaneously disconsidered the working class, declaring that the poor were “most susceptible to corruption,” and most susceptible to the “ills of society,” thus bringing Progressive ideals down. For more about the Progressive contradictions in relation to class see: Shelton Stromquist, Reinventing The People: The Progressive Movement, the Class Problem, and the Origins of Modern Liberalism (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2005). For an ample discussion on the very creation of the cultural hierarchies of “high” and “low” after the general cultural eclectism of the nineteenth century, see: Lawrence W. Levine, Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America. Cambridge (Harvard University Press, 2009).
19 Kuhn, Cinema, Censorship, and Sexuality, 33-34.
these films. While Kuhn mentions the matter adjacently, Schaefer goes further and confirms Brandt’s findings through additional medical booklets of the time that do locate the nest of disease in the working class, such as J. Bayard Clark’s study *The Control of Sex Infections* of 1921 or Edgar Sydenstricker’s 1919 study for the U.S. Public Health Service, which both posit the greater degree to which the lower strata is responsible for carrying of disease. In the light of this evidence, Schaefer argues that sex hygiene films were used to educate the middle-class about venereal disease as an illness that can be contracted from mingling with the lower strata.

These intertwined mechanisms of politics and education are brought into discussion as they have played a substantial role in the creation of, but also in the controversies and increasingly fervent debates against, the sex hygiene movie. They affected both the position of these films in the industry, as a form of entertainment and education, but also in their hands-on portrayal of subjects. If one is to discuss sex health film as a Progressivist tool, nonetheless, one element remains unclear: what were the cinematic methods of the sex hygiene film to construct this propagandistic blaming of the lower-class on-screen? And, if we are to draw a link with the question posed earlier in the introduction: how did these influence the position of the sex hygiene film within the industry as whole?

As sex hygiene films received limited scholarly attention of their own, being mostly addressed as the roots of exploitation cinema, rather than a self-standing body of work, there are still very few academic writings in regards to their style, cinematic methods, dynamics of portrayal of class and Progressivist ideology. The present thesis seeks to understand the sex hygiene film as a Low Other form of filmmaking, an under researched, marginal, dismissed

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22 Schaefer, *Bold!,* 27. It is fair to note that historian Martin Pernick disagrees with this supposition. He writes that there existed a difference inasmuch as poverty and ignorance were the ones being pointed at by sex hygiene pictures, not the poor or the working class itself. So as to support his idea, Pernick cites the interpretations of *Damaged Goods* made by socialist supporters of the sex hygiene film at the given time, as well as a preface for the *Damaged Goods* theater play of 1913 by George Bernard Shaw. The latter stated sex hygiene films condemned not the working class, but poverty, the sins of the rich, and the class system itself for the propagation of venereal disease. For the scope of this thesis, while Pernick’s delineation removes the idea that a doctrine of class would have appealed to the sex hygiene film, it is supported less by matter-of-factly objective evidence and more by subjective readings. However, as the existence of a contradiction is clear, and as there are very limited scholarly writings on the first wave of sex hygiene films, investigating the methods used by the sex hygiene movie can shed light on the contradiction on whether it constructed or avoided to construct a class doctrine. Martin S. Pernick, *The Black Stork Eugenics and The Death of "Defective" Babies in American Medicine and Motion Pictures Since 1915* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 146. George Bernard Shaw, "Preface," in *Three Plays by Brieux* (New York: Brentano’s, 1911), xlvi–xxxii.
body of work, that was additionally itself in charge of portraying a Low Other on-screen. The notion of the Low Other can help the present thesis map out the socio-cultural position of the sex hygiene film, both in a wider cultural framework, and in a specific political context, but also expose the ways the Low Other can be constructed through cinema. As in a circle within a circle, the sex hygiene film was suppressed as a lower form of culture, portraying a “low” entertainment subject and allegedly addressing the lower classes in a particular way.\(^{23}\) An analysis through the Low Other can offer research dedicated to this group of films, and reveal synchronous dynamics of culture and class.

**Importance, Material, Methodology**

On November 16\(^{th}\), 2016, the distribution company Kino Lorber announced the discovery of the long-lost hygiene picture *Motherhood: Life’s Greatest Miracle* (Blue Ray Productions, 1925), independently directed by Lita Lawrence.\(^{24}\) Photochemically preserved, digitally restored, and researched by the Library of Congress and Kino Lorber, *Motherhood* was rereleased on November 20\(^{th}\), 2018 as part of their communal archival project *Pioneers*. Not only does *Motherhood* depict some of the prohibited subjects previously discussed – abortion and birth control – but is also considered to be the earliest surviving feature film directed by an African-American woman. Shelly Stamp, who is the curator of the project, wrote that this “confirms that African-American women have been making films for a lot longer than Hollywood likes to think,” and CEO Richard Lorber underlined that there is a “generous support of a public which is hungry for rare and historically important films.”\(^{25}\) Indeed, *Pioneers* is a Kickstarter project, the general public being the one who helped fund this process of research and restoration of an early film produced at the margins of Hollywood. As one looks back at the marginal, new truths about film history in particular, and American history in general, can be discovered. As Hollywood had dominated not only the production system, but also the scholarly study of American film, it is in the past decades that academics started trying

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\(^{23}\) As it will be discussed further, some reviewers started arguing against the possible commercial entertainment value of medical footage or health “preachings” included in films such as *The Black Stork* (Wharton, Sheriott Pictures Corporation, 1917), *The Scarlet Trail* (G. and L. Features Inc., 1918), or *Fit to Win*. However, as it will be analysed in the following chapters, their appeal to the public was of a more complex structure than that of Hollywood’s commercial releases. “The Black Stork,” *The Moving Picture World* 31, no. 8 (24 February, 1917), 1211. “Social Hygiene Picture More Preachment than Play,” *The Film Daily* 11, no. 81 (29 December, 1918), 14.


to “redress past imbalances in our conception of film history” by reintegrating into the study of film movies believed to be lost or solely forgotten. A meaningful example in this sense is represented by the Orphan Film Symposium and Project, started in 1999 at the University of South Carolina, and took over by the New York University since 2006, whose interest lies in “neglected films.” These are represented through a wide range of non-theatrical material, which can include newsreels, censored material, stock footage, medical films, educational and instructional videos, government films, sponsored films, at the intersection of which the sex hygiene film can also be located. Similar efforts to integrate non-theatrical material into scholarly debates are the more recent 2011 and 2012 anthologies UsefuL Cinema, edited by Charles Accland and Haidee Wasson, and Learning with the Lights Off, by Devin Orgeron, Marsha Orgeron, and Dan Streible, which together take into account an akin range of non-theatrical motion pictures.

Thus, it is to this field that the present thesis seeks to bring a modest contribution to, both through its choice of rarely analysed films, as well as the scrutiny with which the framework of the Low Other will conceivably be applied to them. Underneath this dissertation lies the belief that the study of the first wave of sex hygiene films can offer knowledge about more than a rejected cinematic practice. Past American values and beliefs, and especially values and beliefs that the dominant power was trying to impose or propagate, can permeate through the surface of these often forgotten works. As Barbara Babcock writes, and her claim has become a pillar in the study of marginal or rejected bodies of culture, “what is socially peripheral is often symbolically central.”

The past decades have witnessed a growing interest in rediscovering films that touched on sensitive subjects, and/or have been omitted by “old” film history. Their lack of

26 Schaefer, Bold!, 13.
30 One direction of the “old” film history is the aesthetic tradition, in which a small portion of films are understood as valuable and important to study due to their status of “masterpieces”, auteur pieces, or art cinema. As far as early cinema is concerned, old film theory worked with normative examples of what cinema should evolve into, a trend most evident when the classical narrative cinema of D. W. Griffith or Edwin S. Porter were being perfected. From this perspective, the sex hygiene film was not as much worthy of critics’ attention. James
entertainment and/or refinement when compared to the establishment’s products, their position as a liminal form existing “in between” commercial practice and – as soon as after five years – prohibited filmmaking, their short presence within Hollywood, their unconventional aesthetics in relation to the classical realist style of narrative cinema, can all be posited as reasons for the little interest offered to this group of films throughout film history. Indeed, while the classical Hollywood style featured a linear, action-centered, goal-oriented narrative, driven by the desire of a single protagonist, and leading to definite closure, the sex health film’s style continued to rely on an exhibitionistic approach, eventually featuring a sort of grotesque realism that placed it in conflict to the dominant aesthetic.31

Even in the light of this growing interest, however, sex hygiene films have not yet received scholarly attention of their own. Work that adjacently touches on sex hygiene movies has been primarily preoccupied with the wider study of exploitation as a phenomenon that appeared out of sex hygiene cinema. Such an example is Eric Schaefer’s definitive study on exploitation, "Bold! Daring! Shocking! True!: A History of Exploitation Films, 1919-1959, which invaluably explains and demonstrates the position of sex hygiene films through the lens of exploitation cinema. One notable exception to this tendency of combining exploitation with sex health, however, is his brief 1992 essay “Of Hygiene and Hollywood: Origins of the Exploitation Film,” which, despite its title, dwells primarily on sex hygiene film as a wartime commodity for the middle class, and has been immensely inspiring, and applicable, to the aims of this thesis. And if the limited length of Schaefer’s essay does not accommodate case studies or a close-textual analysis, Annette Kuhn’s Cinema, Censorship and Sexuality, on the other hand, features one chapter that is precisely that, a closer look at the venereal disease pictures of the silent era, including notes on character construction and style.32

Another important study for this discussion is Robert Eberwein’s Sex Ed: Film, Video, and the Framework of Desire, which presents the sex hygiene film as the origin of sex education cinema. While his concerns lay primarily with the wider history of sex education inside the classroom, he dedicates one whole chapter to the sex hygiene film made before and after the


32 Kuhn, 49-71.
1920s, analysing its relationship with medical discourse. His manner of differentiating between hygiene films produced before and after 1919 rests in identifying the first group as “narrative films,” and the second group as “expository films,” due to the greater exhibitionism displayed by the latter. It is his work from which this thesis draws the nomenclature of “narrative” and “expository” and applies it to the methods used by the first hygiene movies in constructing a Low Other on-screen.

As far as a bigger history of medicine and venereal disease is concerned, Alan M. Brandt’s essential No Magic Bullet: A Social History of Venereal Disease in the United States since 1880, facilitates the understanding of the web of relationships woven between the medical, the political, and the social that have fueled the creation of hygiene pictures. Correspondingly, it was research within the history of medicine, namely the history of anaesthetics, which recently brought about the only viewable print of The Black Stork. A mix between the history of anaesthesia and motion pictures, Martin S. Pernick’s study The Black Stork: Eugenics and the Death of Defective Babies in American Medicine and Motion Pictures Since 1915, reveals the eugenics facet of the venereal disease sex hygiene pictures, and prompts careful scrutiny over this forgotten work, that has otherwise benefitted of little to no scholarly revisitation since Pernick’s study.

As no attempts have been made as of yet at addressing the sex hygiene film as a self-standing body of culture, even less so in a way that integrates it into a historical pattern of rejected entertainment, the thesis follows the example of Robert C. Allen who, while writing about the marginal, contradictory, and “low” forms of the concert saloon and the burlesque, places at the foundation of his discussions the concept of the Low Other. The work of Allen, Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture, as well as Richard Butsch’s The Making of American Audiences: From Stage to Television, 1750-1990 analyse the off-stage and on-stage elements that defined the cultural Low Other in the theatrical space that will be transferred onto the film screen. Their discussions about rejected entertainment and the process of formation of the Low Other in the cultural sphere will serve as a method of threading the many facets of the sex hygiene film together, as well as attempt at a wider cultural contextualization.

33 Eberwein, 15-62.
34 Allen, 25-26, 73-78.
By drawing extensively on these studies, the current dissertation can be understood as having an inherent revisionist approach to film history. It understands the sex hygiene film as a place in culture carved for dominant powers to construct their discourses about the Other. Of course, it is not as much about a real Other one learns about when scrutinizing these films, but about the fears and anxieties of those who produced them. In typical New Film History fashion, the representation displayed by historical films is not taken as “real” history, but a constructed version of history that “accords with the ideological values of its makers and the cultural tastes of its audiences.” It is in the light of this revisionist ethos that the thesis will try to bring potentially novel sources into discussion, conceivably revealing a new dynamics in the brief history of the commercial hygiene film.

The dissertation embraces the critical examination of both secondary and primary sources, both filmic and non-filmic. As Douglas Gomery and Robert C. Allen wrote in their influential study on film-history writing, it is often common for early film historians to be unable to directly engage with their object of study, since a considerable percentage of films of the first decades of cinema are known to be lost. In this sense, the process of research often implies a certain level of reassembly of relics, of “unearthing” new sources or materials, of which some are either overlooked or forgotten, so as to recreate particular moments in film history. Most of these are represented by non-filmic materials and can include production records, scripts, newspapers, trade press articles and reviews, advertisements, censorship materials, even government documents. In accessing such a broad array of material, digital archival research was employed, primarily through the Media History Digital Library (MHDL) and its search engine Lantern, which make available a wide array of source materials, mainly in the form of digitized, searchable copies of trade journals and periodicals. Most featured is material from *The Moving Picture World, The Film Daily, Motion Picture News, Variety,* and *Motography,* although articles from *Reel Life,* or *Exhibitor’s Herald* have also been of interest.

For the part of the thesis concerned with integrating the sex hygiene film into a bigger cultural

37 Chapman, Glancy, and Harper, 7. It is to be noted that Thomas Elsaesser used the term “new film history” in 1986 to describe the phenomenon of early film history interventions emerged as a result of the famous Brighton symposium “Cinema 1900-1906” at the International Federation of Film Archives. Then, the rediscovery and restoration of a considerable amount of film material dated prior to 1906, encouraged a new generation of researchers and theorists to revisit early film history using a wider methodological scope. The core principle consists of putting “old” standardized film history under revisionist inquiry. See: Thomas Elsaesser, “The New Film History,” *Sight & Sound* 55, no. 4 (1986): 246-51.
framework of rejected entertainment, however, material older than that provided by MHDL was required, and as such The New York Times digitized archive and their search engine, TimesMachine, as well as the digitized archives of the Library of Congress, provided the necessary evidence. As far as the research method within these digitized archives is concerned, all trade paper journals published between 1910 to 1925 that feature the titles of venereal disease hygiene films produced between 1914 and 1919 have been taken into consideration, as well as those who include the keywords “sex hygiene,” “venereal disease,” “eugenics,” or “exploitation.” There have also been taken into consideration, as much as possible, the position of the publishing company, journal, or writer at the time of issue, as well as the political context.

As a result, when faced with the limitation of not being able to view all discussed material, data about the given films has been drawn from reviews, articles, and advertisements within the trade journals mentioned above, as well as from the relevant plot summaries and discussions proposed by Schaefer, Kuhn, Eberwein, or Pernick.

In regards to the choice of films, every discussed picture epitomizes a stage in the development of the first wave of sex hygiene films. Concretely, Damaged Goods represents the first ever sex hygiene picture to be produced, as well as the first film to ever bring the subject of venereal disease onto the screen. The Black Stork embodies a shift of focus within this group of movies, a move towards extreme eugenics, forgotten yet historically necessary to ponder on. The film was chosen as it has benefitted of little to no scholarly attention in the field of film studies as of yet, and because its array of specific expository methods allows a clearer look into the controversies sparked around hygiene films. Representing a point of fragmentation among the reviewers’ opinions, The Black Stork can shed a new light on the intricate system of ideological dominance that created and rejected the hygiene picture. The third case study, The End of the Road, represents the last venereal disease film produced within the establishment by the Public Health Service, American Social Hygiene Association, and a major name such as

40 Known titles of sex hygiene pictures concerned with the topic of venereal disease and produced within the set timeframe include: Damaged Goods, The Price He Paid (Humanology Film Productions, 1914), A Victim of Sin (unknown, 1914), Fit to Win, The Scarlet Trail, The Black Stork, The Spreading Evil (James Keane Feature Photo-Play Productions, 1918), The End Of The Road, Open Your Eyes (Warner Bros, State Health Films Inc., 1919), The Solitary Sin (New Art Film Company, 1919).

41 To offer a concrete example, all articles appeared in Reel Life (Mutual Film Company’s trade publication) referring to any early version of Damaged Goods (which was distributed by Mutual Film Company) have been understood either as industry distribution news or advertising materials.

42 First released in 1914, Damaged Goods was rereleased shortly after in 1915, then again in 1917, 1919, and 1935, the latter being a re-filmed, toned-down, censored version. This history of rereleases represents further evidence of its relevance.
Famous Players-Lasky, and is also the only sex hygiene picture from the year 1919 still available for viewing in a digitized version through the National Film Preservation Foundation. *The End of the Road* is the exponent of the group of films created in 1919 that inverted the initial hierarchy proposed by *Damaged Goods* and were rejected from the mainstream. One after the other, the proposed pictures represent the stages of creation, fragmentation, and rejection of the sex hygiene film.

For the purpose of this thesis, I have limited the choice of films to those referring directly to the effects of venereal disease. It is to be noted that between 1916 and 1917 the shift towards eugenics materialized not solely through *The Black Stork*, but also through a series of sex hygiene pictures on the topics of abortion and birth control – such an example is Lois Weber’s famous 1916 film *Where are My Children?*. These films, however, represent milestones requiring a broader framework than the present thesis allows and, having already been offered substantial revisitation by scholars such as Shelley Stamp, one considers more compelling to address films that are less in focus.43 More than this, when approaching the first wave of sex hygiene films as a phenomenon, venereal disease pictures play a significant role: they have represented both the creation and the rejection of the sex hygiene commercial cycle.

**Disposition of Thesis**

The present thesis consists of two main parts, each of them concerned with two main objectives.

The first part provides a theoretical and historical framework, discussing the Low Other as a concept pertaining both to the cultural and social sphere. First, the theory and the cultural significance of the Low Other will be elucidated, as well as the process of fabricating a Low Other at a cultural level. Thereafter, a social and political background will be outlined, with an

emphasis on the contradictory nature of the Progressive Era, responsible for the creation of a social Low Other through the sex hygiene film.

The second part of the thesis offers information on the varied aesthetic composition of the sex health film, thereafter proceeding into a closer analysis of the three case studies: *Damaged Goods*, *The Black Stork*, and *The End of the Road*, in order to reflect the dynamics presented in the first part of the thesis, as well as propose a reading of the films’ cultural and ideological significance. Each case study begins with a brief reception analysis, followed by a closer discussion over two to three scenes, aspects, or narrative threads, depending on the construction and availability of each film. Whereas *The Black Stork* and *The End of the Road* allow a scene analysis, for example, a film like *Damaged Goods*, whose 1914 version is known to be lost, will be reassembled through the reviews and articles of the time, as well as the discussions sparked within the scholarly fields of exploitation and education film.
Theoretical and Historical Framework

The Politics and Poetics of Transgression

The present thesis relies on the hypothesis that cultural categories of high and low, social and aesthetic, are never entirely separable. The central theoretical focus is given to the writings of Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, specifically *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, in which they propose that cultural norms are the product of “complex inter-relating and dependent hierarchies of high and low.”44 As they argue, these dynamics can happen simultaneously at the level of the physical body, the psychic form, geographical space, as well as social formation. More concretely, they observe how cultural transformations of authorship, literature, the carnival, and the fair contain oppositions of types of bodies, psychic forms, locations, social structures – there are hierarchies being created between the clean, healthy body, and the ill, grotesque one, the mentally abled and disabled, the slums and the city, the bourgeoisie and the working class.45 Just as Stallybrass and White observe the formation of hierarchy within the domain of literary authorship and genres, the present thesis will try to deconstruct the hierarchies included by and surrounding the sex hygiene film. By situating a product within the social sphere that produced it, but also understanding the ranks and hierarchies of this culture, the values of social and political dynamics come to the fore.

According to Stallybrass and White, the higher discourse is generally associated with the most powerful economic groups that exist at the centre of cultural power. Moreover, it is usually them who gain the authority to decide what is to be considered high and low in a given culture.46 Cultural materialist Raymond Williams understands this as an “inherent dominative mode” creating dominant definitions of superior and inferior.47 Within the topic of the present thesis, both the bourgeoisie and Hollywood will represent the dominative side, constructing a low through the creation, fragmentation and then rejection of the sex hygiene film. As a response to the “inherent dominative mode,” however, once autonomous, the low has the

44 Stallybrass and White, 2-3.
46 Ibid., 4.
subversive power to provoke these dominant definitions. This is an interesting framework to apply to under-researched areas, especially when they are under-researched precisely due to their rejection by the dominant force as a lower, debased, unaesthetic form of entertainment. And as Stallybrass and White observe, the low – defined as such by the high only to validate itself as superior – can not only see the relationship between the two parts from a different angle, but can also “impose a counter-view” through what Barbara A. Babcock names “symbolic inversions in art and society.”

By imposing an “inverted hierarchy,” the low can momentarily provoke a “degradation” of status. Babcock accurately describes that the marginal, “far from being a residual category of experience, is its very opposite.” Indeed, “what is socially peripheral is symbolically central, and if we ignore or minimize inversion and other forms of cultural negation, we often fail to understand the dynamics of [cultural] processes generally.” In the Politics and Poetics of Transgression these processes are reflected and stem from within the authors’ analysis of the carnival, a cultural form that exposes bodies and differences of class in a way not foreign to the development of the first wave of sex hygiene movies.

A timely form of entertainment, “carnival inverts the everyday hierarchies, structures, rules, and customs of its social formation” – that is, servants become kings, kings become servants, men dress as women, and notions of hierarchy and order are being transgressed. At the same time, it implies a form of “status degradation through exposure of the grotesque aspects of the body and exorbitant exaggeration of its features.” Carnival is exhibitionist, it exposes the material body as a pleasurable grotesquerie – protuberant, fat, disproportionate, incomplete, open at its orifices, giving special attention to the genitals and anus. It does all these by means of mask and costume, but in a grotesque realism that functions as a ritual of degradation towards authority. However, as Stallybrass and White argue, this form of attack of the authority is only momentary – inversions are ultimately played as a comic act, inscribing

49 These ideas originate from Mikhail Bakhtin’s highly influential Rebelais and His World, in which the carnival is understood as celebrating a “temporary liberation from the prevailing truth of the established order,” as well as delineating “the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions.” For Bakhtin, this occurred both through the carnival’s collective laughter, and its exhibition of bodies. Mikhail Bakhtin, Rebelais and His World, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 10. He does not, however, discuss the mingling of the “high” and “low,” and does not distinguish their hybridization within the commercial. It is for this reason I have chosen Stallybrass and White’s more revised approach.
50 Babcock, 32.
51 Stallybrass and White, 3, 17.
52 Ibid., 183.
all that the bourgeoisie must struggle not to be so as to maintain a stable and “correct” sense of self. In their terms, carnival enabled only “voyeuristic glimpses of a promiscuous loss of status.” This explains, to a certain extent, how the grotesque and extravagant carnival managed to preserve a position within culture without being suppressed or entirely eliminated. Although it was dismissed at first by those who associated themselves with the middle- or the upper-class, the fact that it allowed a safe glimpse into the world of the “unworthy” was of a seductive nature. It reinforced the dominance of the bourgeoisie by granting it access to a self-manufactured Low Other.

The Repugnance and Fascination of the Low Other

There is a striking dualism in the representations of the lower strata – they are simultaneously dismissed and desired, tamed into a cultural form that is safe to experience. In a way that is reminiscent of and drawing on Foucault’s History of Sexuality, Stallybrass and White in Politics and Poetics, but also Robert C. Allen in his work on burlesque, discuss how repugnance and fascination are intertwined in the political process of rejecting and eliminating the low as an Other. There is a recurrent pattern: the “top” is in a continuous process of rejection of the “bottom” to achieve prestige and status, but it discovers that is in some manner dependent to what Stallybrass, White and Allen refer to as the “Low Other.”

The Low Other has its roots in the same Other described in Hegel’s Master-Slave Dialectic, the same Other taken on by Simone de Beauvoir in The Second Sex – it is a social construct opposing and thus constructing the self. However, the Low Other adds on the dimension of desire intertwined with this opposition. As cultural philosopher Douglas Keller writes, if we are to talk about Otherness as a “nemesis” we can not only refer to some Other destined to be feared, condemned, and fought, but also to someone to be fascinated with. The Low Other stands for something that is contained, then eliminated from the dominant social sphere as debased, dirty and unworthy, but that is simultaneously the object of desire and/or

53 Ibid.
55 Stallybrass and White, 5.
fascination. As Stallybrass and White put it, “the low-other is despised and denied at the level of political organization and social being whilst it is instrumentally constitutive of the shared imaginary repertoires of the dominant culture.” Because it is by reference to the low that the rest of the cultural hierarchy is defined, the lower strata of the body, of literature, of place, and of culture are regularly – Allen notes “even obsessively” – represented in dual and antagonistic ways that elicit both “repugnance and fascination.” The result is:

[...] a mobile, conflictual fusion of power, fear, and desire in the construction of subjectivity, a psychological dependence upon precisely those Others which are being rigorously opposed and excluded at the social level. It is for this reason that what is socially peripheral is so frequently symbolically central.

Stallybrass and White discuss the carnival as the space where the Low Other is recreated through protuberant costumes and deforming masks, so as to simultaneously disgust and fascinate the dominant observer. There is a certain voyeuristic pleasure that comes with the superior watching from a distance, insofar that Foucault named observation “a new technology of sex.” Whether it is a medical observation, a glance at the masquerade of a carnival, the watching of a burlesque performer, or of the lower strata on the canvas, the history of entertainment is repeatedly displaying the Low Other as an object to be gazed upon, observed, exposed, while continuously dismissed. The high defines itself by delineating the low residing within its space and no longer accommodating it. So as to create a hierarchy, it had to reject it until the low would relocate into a different act. “Salacious” elements never ceased to exist, they simply took refuge at the periphery of arts and of cities, confirming the existence of a high authority pushing its relocation time and again. The sex hygiene film, so as the exploitation film whose first branch it constitutes, has been created by the dominant power and then expelled from its of own landscape of commercial film. Turning to Richard Butsch and his Making of the American Audiences will demonstrate this phenomenon is not insular. He demonstrates that the history of entertainment is one in which the dominant power, through an ongoing

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58 Allen, 26-27. Stallybrass and White, 5.
59 Stallybrass and White, 6.
60 Allen, 26.
61 Stallybrass and White, 5.
62 Ibid., 6-26.
63 Foucault, 116-124.
“obsession” for “sanitation,” simultaneously creates alternative acts and spaces of discourse, only to reject them once more, in a perpetual loop of entertainment dividing entertainment.65

The Process of Fabricating a Low Other

The sex hygiene film was not singular in its demise from mainstream entertainment, the circle of definition through rejection is as old as the conflict between “legitimate” and “illegitimate” theatre and is a recurrent cultural pattern. In The Making of American Audiences, Richard Butsch does a close analysis of audiences in the era of early stage performance – a period when one side excluded the other not on the terms of the “salacious” performed content, but because of the “immoral” elements – such as liquor consumption, smoking, prostitution, and overtly disorderly conduct – to be found in the performance environment.66 These are precisely the topics, transferred to the screen, which condemned the sex hygiene movie and pushed it to the periphery of cinema. Indeed, the move towards “sanitizing” theatre similarly resulted in the constitution and migration of all these elements in a different theatrical experience – the Low Other have been, one by one, the concert saloon featuring variety acts, the vaudeville, the burlesque, the cinema – each of them sanitized, in turn, to make space for the appearance of the next cultural Low Other.67 They can be identified as the theatrical predecessors of the sex hygiene exploitation film. As Robert. C. Allen writes: “The construction by exclusion of a bourgeois theatre in America was part of a larger historical process by which the bourgeoisie more generally defined itself in terms of what it had rejected, excluded, outlawed, or repressed.”68 What is interesting, through the lens of early filmmaking, is that the elements which caused reprisal and social anxiety into the theatres – the misbehaving youth, the upper-class men seduced by working-class women, the consumption of alcohol and cigars – moved from the theatre space onto the film screen. This subchapter discusses very shortly, so as to show that the process in which the sex hygiene film inscribed was not insular, the transition of the Low Other from around the stage onto the stage, within the context of the perpetual subdivision of entertainment. If we are to understand the dismissal of the sex hygiene film as a move towards magnifying Hollywood’s status at a time when the establishment was still in a

65 Ibid.
66 Butsch, 95-107.
67 Ibid., 95-107, 121-122, 146-149.
68 Allen, 73.
period of formation, tracing back to the theatre’s dismissal of its more “rowdy” and “boisterous” elements can be of use.

It is inherently difficult to separate a Low Other body of culture from the social Low Other. In fact, the very process of creation of this cultural Low Other as a debased form of entertainment can be seen as emerging from and relying on its social, physical, palpable counterpart. Robert C. Allen argues that the efforts to sanitize theatre in the 1850s – efforts through which the bourgeois carved a discourse space of their own – had eventually separated the mainstream theatre space from the working class, assertive masculinity, sexuality, alcohol, and all the “vulgarism and immorality” which had been part of the theatrical experience in the 1830s and 1840s. Similar to bourgeois cinema, bourgeois theatre in America was constructed in terms of what was excluded as “noisy, dirty, disgusting, and vulgar.”\(^\text{69}\) If by 1920 there was already a division between Hollywood and a Low Other cinema, these early transformations within film were only mirroring the separation of the bourgeois theatre from its wayward elements in the 1850s and onwards. There is the pattern of places where the bourgeois identity could be manufactured by rejecting the Low Other. As Stallybrass and White note regarding the process by which the bourgeois self is constructed, “what starts as a simple repulsion or rejection of symbolic matter foreign to the self, inaugurates a process of introjection and negation which is always complex in its effects.”\(^\text{70}\)

While theatre tried to define itself as a high form of culture, it rejected parts initially inherent to itself – such as rowdiness, the consumption of alcohol within the audience, interaction between spectators and the play.\(^\text{71}\) Stallybrass and White emphasize that theatre “has always appeared suspect and unstable” but was “subjected once again to the onslaught of the ‘civilizing process’ in a renewed attempt to clean up plays and their unruly audiences.”\(^\text{72}\) When these elements were dismissed, they collectively relocated into the concert saloon. Thus, when the concert saloon came into existence as an alternative space to the theatre, it was nothing less than the mainstream theatre’s negative image, its “identity in difference.”\(^\text{73}\) In this surrogate

\(^{69}\) Ibid.
\(^{70}\) Stallybrass and White, 193.
\(^{71}\) Stallybrass and White, as well as Butsch demonstrate sovereignty in the performance space as an inherent part of the theatrical experience up to the 1850s. See Butsch: 45-47, Stallybrass and White: 85-95. Also see: Tyler Anbinder, *Five Points: The 19th-century New York City Neighborhood that Invented Tap* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 2001), 178.
\(^{72}\) Stallybrass and White, 84.
\(^{73}\) Allen, 73.
space, variety acts could be performed actively engaging the audience in the spectacle. Despite the fact earlier forms of carnival and theatre blurred the lines between performer and spectator, after the Civil War the convention of the “fourth wall” was introduced. As well-behaved audiences started being favored over reactive spectators, exercising sovereignty within the performance space became a sign of the lower class. Each time entertainment relocates – this will include the sex health and exploitation film – the direct address and the shattering of the fourth wall become elements within the new cultural form.

A novel element of the concert saloons of the 1860s, however, was their incorporation of sexuality as entertainment. Indeed, advertisements of “enticing waitresses” posted in-between “respectable” Broadway theatres so as to attract patrons into concert saloons triggered controversies very quickly. Contrasting the now “high” theatre halls, saloons gave prominence to alcoholic beverages, served by working class “waiter girls,” who constituted the sexual display and main attraction. The main discourse against saloons revolved around the morality of the places and their clients. Richard Butsch writes on the subject:

Some reformers considered that the most disturbing consequence was the contamination of the bourgeois home by the husbands who patronized these same saloons, attracted to their aggressive, virile, masculine mix of liquor, cigars, and commercial sex. With free time, money, and prerogative affluent men could float from working-class dives to fancy Broadway saloons as it pleased them.

Indeed, the columns of the early 1860s described concert saloons as “a Great social evil,” “a great source of crime,” and placed of “avowed Bacchus and Phallus worship.” This latter column from the New York Evening Post also identified the problem as being the infamous “waitresses” and described exchanges in which they propose “dissipated-looking fellows” to

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74 Butsch, 7-8.
75 For more information on the topic of the concert saloon waiter girls see: Ann-Louise Shapiro, “Working Girls,” International Labor and Working Class History 45 (Spring 1994), 96-107.
78 Butsch, 96.
79 “Music and the Drama,” Wilkes’ Spirit of the Times, October 12, 1861, 96.
rent a private box and “have some fun.” Wilkes’ *Spirit of the Times* added that saloons “decoyed” young girls from “honorable pursuits to become waiters and consequently prostitutes.”

But the worries regarding the concert saloon were not merely in regards to working class girls appealing to sex work for an income. In turn, its core problem was that it permitted a mix between classes and alcohol was facilitating these exchanges. Beneath all layers, it was the same reason “daylight screenings” came to be imposed in the cinemas of the early 1910s. The coming together of all classes in the same intimate space of entertainment broke down the rules of social discrimination. Thus, a similar pattern of strategies had to be reinforced on concert saloons and their variety acts as it had been on mainstream theatre. The environment had to be sanitized by removing liquor, prostitution, and ensuring “chaste” performances. What included elements thought of as degenerated or immoral, whether at the level of the entertainment or the theatrical space, was prohibited. Thus, in 1862 an “anti-concert saloon” bill was passed, which closed most of the concert saloons in New York, moment after which variety was confirmed as a respectable theatrical form. A *New York Times* reviewer wrote: “It is an established rule in each of these theatres that the performer who uses an immoral or objectionable phrase or gesture on the stage shall be dismissed […] Can as much be said for modern society plays!”

While the concert saloon sanitized, what used to be variety relocated as vaudeville, which sometimes included more sexualized content within the performances, but then followed a similar pattern of relocation and rejection. In a society where the conflict of class was carried on the field of intimacy, and taboos were fought on a legal level, the prohibited topics found their way into the world of entertainment. Whether sexual display happened as a performance or an act surrounding it, it represented a powerful attraction for audiences regardless of class.

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82 Ibid.
83 "Theaters and Things Theatrical," Wilkes’ *Spirit of the Times*, May 21, 1864, 181.
87 Butsch, 97.
88 Allen, 76.
90 Butsch, 108-120.
91 Schaefer, *Bold!*, 27.
In a somewhat different political and social circumstance, sex hygiene pictures were too an ambiguous attraction. They permitted conversation about sexuality in times of inhibition, censorship, puritan social and moral constraints, but also made use of grotesque realist displays of this sexuality. Although their formation as a more politically stirred product was at first meant to regulate the people’s immoralities, their ultimate relocation as a titillating commodity into a Low Other makes it even more interesting in relation to the discussed pattern. Years after, the concerns society had in regards to the concert saloon remained intact, yet the affluent men described as the patrons of these establishments were now being converted into main characters within the sex hygiene movie. The positions they occupied as characters within the movies, was shaped by the sex hygiene movie’s subordination to, or antagonism towards, the ideology that created it.

**The Low Other and Progressivism**

At the beginning of filmmaking the Other was a fundamentally central figure. The timely cinema of attractions, which will be discussed more in detail in the next chapter, made use of images of indigenous peoples, oriental dances, and Asian war newsreels, so as to portray an exotic, luring, fascinating Low Other. But this Other was at a “safe distance” for the American spectator, not only due to the screen, but also due to its geographical location. On the other hand, the first wave of sex hygiene films were meant to “educate” the American bourgeoisie about the local Other, and for the first time through means of cinema.

Sander Lawrence Gilman in *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness*, discusses the Otherness as the place where society projects its fears and anxieties, provoked by the needs and demands of a marginalized group. The Other does not appear by hazard, but is the product of a historical and social context – such as the immigration boom between 1900 and 1915, a period when the inability to absorb a large number of newcomers was paired with the anxiety of the industrial era and permeated through early exploitation cinema and its depiction of the Other. Gilman also notes that when a marginalized group comes forward demanding better conditions in society, “the status anxiety produced by those demands characteristically translates into a sense of loss of control. Thus, a group that has been

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93 Scahefer, *Bold!*, 23.
marginally visible can suddenly become the definition of the Other.” 94 He continues by writing that “this mental representation of difference is but the projection of the tension between control and its loss present within each individual in every group. The tension produces an anxiety that is given shape as the Other.”95 In the Cinematic City, writing specifically about the image of the Other in Hollywood filmmaking, David B. Clarke emphasizes: “Hollywood has created a series of Others which in no sense relate to the self-definition of these diverse other places and peoples: rather they project the needs, fears, fantasies and representations of particular American ideologies.”96 Hollywood is constructing different histories and realities by constructing an Other. Thus, if we are to analyse more in depth the construction of the Low Other in the sex hygiene film, one must backtrack to the ideology that created this group of movies.

Progressivism flourished in America roughly between 1900 and 1917. According to historians Arthur S. Link and Richard L. McCormick, Progressivism was a reform movement that lacked a unifying ideology, flaunting many facets and contradictions. More than this, Progressivism manifested itself differently in different regions of the country, often in contradictory ways97 – as a whole, it played a part in everything from railroad regulation, woman suffrage, immigration control, realist art, to paved roads, prohibition of child labour, and minimum wages.98 And as their overarching goal was “to improve the conditions of life and labor and to create as much social stability as possible,” progressives relied on both on Protestant moralism and scientific beliefs (mainly in the fields of medicine, psychology, statistics, sociology) to meet it.99

But it was hard to pin down a central scope or theme of Progressivism as a movement. And while it can only be understood as a dispersed ideology, whose conflicting character lies

94 Gilman, 19.
95 Ibid.
96 David B. Clarke, The Cinematic City (London: Routledge, 1997), 33-34.
97 As a more concrete example: in the North and the West Progressives fought against corruption within cities and governments, the repression of workers in mines and factories, as well as for the restriction of immigration, social segregation, and public education. In the agricultural areas of the South and Great Plains, Progressives pleaded against exploitation of child labour, chronic diseases, railroad monopolies. Common ground was found in supporting women’s rights, segregation, immigration restriction and alcohol prohibition. For more in-depth analysis of the contradictions of Progressivism, as well as the differences between different states, see: Arthur S. Link and Richard L. McCormick, Progressivism (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1991).
99 Link and McCormick, 20-25.
in “shifting coalitions,” progressives did share common ground. Separating groups into “deserving and undeserving classes” defined the immigration reform that was the hallmark of the Progressive Era.\(^\text{100}\) There was a common core conviction that industrialisation brought along many “social ills” – such as immigration, alcoholism, poverty, prostitution, disease – and that it was for the “public interest” and for a “common good” that these would be regulated through social reform.\(^\text{101}\) There was a wide acceptance of eugenics and a growing anxiety of the “unwelcome, un-American imbalances in their society.”\(^\text{102}\) The Other, in this given circumstance, was constituted by the European and Asian working class immigrants, thought to lead the superior Anglo-Saxon race to what Theodore Roosevelt called the “greatest problem of civilization,” namely “race suicide.” Race suicide meant that “inferior immigrant races,” such as Slavs, Latins, Asians, and Hebrews, were better adapted to the circumstances of industrial capitalism and thus would outbreed the superior Anglo-Saxon race.\(^\text{103}\) Then, Roosevelt frequently returned to the theme of “elimination instead of the survival of the fittest” also known as eugenics.\(^\text{104}\)

The pseudo-science of eugenics was a move towards controlling human breeding so as to improve heredity in the United States. The “first object” of eugenics, according to founder Francis Galton, was “to check the birth rate of the unfit instead of allowing them to come into being.” The “second object” was “the improvement of the race by furthering the productivity of the fit by early marriages and the healthful rearing of children.”\(^\text{105}\) Eugenicists argued that the human gene pool was in danger of being weakened in terms of intelligence, strength, and ability through miscegenation and breeding by “inferior peoples.”\(^\text{106}\) Progressive Era eugenics tended to be racist, yet racism had a different form. The most influential racial taxonomy of the day, *The Races of Europe*, was written by William Z. Ripley in 1899, and described “races” as ethnicity or nationality, especially when distinguishing between Europeans, so that the English, or those of Anglo-Saxon origin, were considered to be a distinct race from, for instance, the Irish race or the Italian race.\(^\text{107}\) But the human hierarchy went further than race, “unfit” could also mean women, the lower classes, the mentally ill, the physically disabled, epileptics, or

\(^{100}\) Leonard, 207.
\(^{101}\) Link and McCormick, 3.
\(^{102}\) Nugent, 1-5.
\(^{103}\) Leonard, 208.
those “morally deficient,” such as criminals.\textsuperscript{108} The sex hygiene films of the 1916 and 1917 will represent the concrete reflection of such beliefs. As Ann Gibson Winfield effectively states in her study, \textit{Eugenics and Education in America}, “eugenics operated in a myriad ways to construct definitions of race, ability, and degerancy that are uniquely American.”\textsuperscript{109}

Indeed, at the wider level of political, social and medical authority, eugenicists represented the dominative side deciding what the Low Other looked like, where it placed itself in the hierarchy of physical body, psychic form, geographical space, social formation. They have constructed a local Low Other onto which the local superior power could imprint its own fears, diseases, and grotesquerie. But more than everything, this grotesquerie was solely passed on by the Low Other.

**The Low Other, Puritanism, and Sexuality**

Simultaneously, Progressivism was a nurturing environment for America’s puritan legacy, which explains why the Comstock Law, issued on the March 3\textsuperscript{rd}, 1873, was still agreed with and in use.\textsuperscript{110} Also known as \textit{The Act for the Suppression of Trade in, and Circulation of, Obscene Literature and Articles of Immoral Use}, the Comstock Law banned any type of information regarding sexual health on grounds of moral decency. As making knowledge on sexual health available to the masses was thought to encourage sexual promiscuity, a “conspiracy of silence” suppressed any discourse about sex, sexuality, protection, venereal diseases, or abortion. This happened at the level of culture, education, and medicine alike. Indeed, historian of medicine Allan M. Brandt discusses the extent to which the conspiracy of silence was pushed by puritan legacies during the Progressive Era: “Because of misunderstandings of the pathology of the disease, as well as a desire to avoid the moral opprobrium attached to venereal infection, physicians often ascribed deaths due to syphilis to other causes.”\textsuperscript{111} Thus, science and puritanism found room to cohabitate under the conflicting Progressivist mores, keeping life-saving information on sexuality and sexual health from society and culture alike.

\textsuperscript{108} Leonard, 208.  
\textsuperscript{109} Winfield, 4-5.  
\textsuperscript{111} Brandt, 10-12.
Foucault wrote that the political repression of sexuality is generally defined through its three main features: taboo, nonexistence, and silence.\textsuperscript{112} And this can equally be applied to the circumstance of Progressivism. Foucault states: “Repression operated as a sentence to disappear, but also as an injunction to silence, and affirmation of nonexistence, and, by implication, an admission that there was nothing to say about such things, nothing to see, and nothing to know.”\textsuperscript{113} Sexuality not only “did not exist, [but it also] had no right to exist and would be made to disappear upon its least manifestation – whether in acts or in words.” Sexuality was first and foremost repressed at the level of language: “by not even pronouncing the word, prudishness ensured nobody spoke of sex.”\textsuperscript{114} As Foucault describes it, sex was regarded and accepted for its reproductive function inside the family. What went beyond the edge of marriage and into the realms of pleasure, was considered a domain of perversion which violated moral codes.\textsuperscript{115} By defining the limits of “normal” sexuality, however, one also delineated the “abnormal” limits of it. By pinpointing what is deviant, a society makes room for it – and there was something inherently “deviant” in the carnival, in the burlesque, in the sex hygiene and exploitation films. Foucault states that when deviance was acknowledged, it was offered two spaces where to exist – the brothel and the psychiatric hospital.\textsuperscript{116} However, as analysed in the second part of this thesis, both the brothel and the psychiatric hospital found their way into the sex health film. Sex was political, observed, and regulated – art could expose it, or simultaneously be used to regulate it.

When discussing sexuality in the Western versus the Eastern world, Foucault differentiates between an \textit{ars erotica} and \textit{scientia sexualis}. He writes that Western society in general never developed an \textit{ars erotica}. Foucault describes it as follows:

In the erotic art, truth is drawn from pleasure itself, understood as a practice and accumulated as experience; pleasure is not considered in relation to an absolute law of the permitted and the forbidden, nor by reference to a criterion of utility, but first and foremost in relation to itself; it is experienced as pleasure, evaluated in terms of its intensity, its specific quality, its duration, its reverberations in the body and soul.\textsuperscript{117}

\textsuperscript{112} Foucault, 5.
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., 4.
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 17.
\textsuperscript{115} Brandt, 5.
\textsuperscript{116} Foucault, 4.
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., 70-71.
Thus, according to Foucault, in the erotic art there should be no construct of “the permitted and the forbidden” – namely, the high and the low of both the physical body and the social formation. More than this, the erotic art should be defined “in relation to itself” not in relation to any sort of Other. But on the contrary, he continues, in the Western world scientia sexualis has generally replaced the ars erotica. Scientia sexualis places desire outside the individual; truth cannot be drawn from pleasure itself, but rather from observing the subject of desire. He notes:

The pleasure is not in the act itself, but in the analysis of sex: pleasure in the truth of pleasure, the pleasure of knowing that truth, of discovering and exposing it, the fascination of seeing it and telling it, of captivating and capturing others by it, of confiding it in a secret, of luring it out into the open, [this is] the specific pleasure of the true discourse on pleasure.118

There is something intrinsically objectifying and voyeuristic about scientia sexualis. Simultaneously, however, it embodies a considerably wider and nearly medical process of observing, analysing, and exposing an element of desire as a sexual Other. Foucault forwards the idea that there is a certain pleasure the dominant side experiences when it exerts its power to oversee, delineate, and regulate sex. It functions as a “mechanism with a double impetus: pleasure and power,” that is precisely the pleasure of exercising one’s power, preponderantly in matters implying a combination of taboo, shame, and injunction to silence, such as sex under puritan laws. His ideas resonate with those of Stallybrass and White inasmuch as the spiral of pleasure and power draws from the act of observing something that is both fascinating and repugnant, inscribing it in a system to keep it regulated and confined. In a more concrete example, Foucault writes about doctors and psychiatrists studying and delineating “deviant” sexualities. He labels this act of studying and observing as “a new technology of sex” – “new” in that for the most part it “escaped the ecclesiastical institution without being truly independent of the thematics of sin.”119 For the philosopher, the new technology of sex was watched over and institutionalized by a complementary system of pedagogy, medicine, economics, and, one could add, politics, which converted it into a problem of the state.120 Within Progressivism, with its reliance on science and anxiety over the race suicide, sex’s need of regulation permeated to a deeper level. If, as Schaefer argues, sex was thought to have become a tool of the Other, used

118 Ibid., 71.
119 Ibid., 116.
120 Ibid.
to inflict middle-class families with venereal diseases and endanger their reproduction, it makes sense that even more significant than representations of sex were images of the effects of sex, manifestations of venereal disease on the body. 121

The proliferation of this new technology of sex at an institutional level occurs roughly at the same time as another phenomenon identified by Jonathan Crary in Techniques of the Observer. 122 He identifies one of the foundations of nineteenth century modernism as form of vision that is inherently defined by a multifaceted form of observation. Trying to answer debates over the one-point perspective and nature of perception after the nineteenth century, he writes in The Techniques of the Observer that now one needs to look at the perceiving subject rather than at the perspective: “Vision and its effects are always inseparable from the possibilities of an observing subject who is both the historical product and the site of certain practices, techniques, institutions, and procedures of subjectification.” 123 He proposes one discerns the spectator from observer. The term “spectator” implies – in Crary’s words – “a passive onlooker at a spectacle, as at an art gallery or theater.” He suggests ”observer” is more of an appropriate term to describe what happens to the process of viewing in the nineteenth and twentieth century with the advance of modernity. While “observare means to conform one’s actions with, to comply with,” the observer is “one who sees within a prescribed set of possibilities, one who is embedded in a system of conventions and limitations.” 124 These conventions refer not only to representational practices: “the observer who emerges with modernity is an effect of an irreducibly heterogeneous system of discursive, social, technological, and institutional relations.” 125 Thus, according to the art critic, observation and the observer became part of a larger institutionalized system. By utilizing cinema as an apparatus of this system, Progressivism creates an epitome for Crary’s techniques of the observer. More than this, it creates a decisive moment in the relationship of spectators to representations of the sexual body, as it authorizes its exhibition through cinema and its viewing in the projection space.

Historically, this occurred as venereal disease spread across all strata of society, and the imminence of an American race suicide overthrew the conspiracy of silence. 126 In the uncertainty surrounding not only the state of the poor and the other “ills” of industrialization

121 Schaefer, Bold!, 27.
123 Crary, 5.
124 Ibid., 5-6.
125 Ibid., 6-7.
126 Schaefer, Bold!, 19-21.
but also World War I and the mingling of soldiers with other “races,” a controlled way of disseminating information and “educating” the people started being sought after. The country was concerned about the extent of the disease, which brought about a certain openness in publicly discussing the matter.\footnote{It is not easy to determine the actual rate of venereal disease in the United States at the beginning of the 1910s, however, as the official reference source, \textit{Historical Abstracts of the United States}, does not begin to include statistical information about venereal disease until 1919. Through a work of reassembly of medical materials and testimonials of the time, Brandt manages to demonstrate, nonetheless, the growing national anxiety in regards to the spreading of venereal diseases. Brandt, 16, 59, 62, 72.} A modern and relatively new technology, film was thus chosen by Progressives as a means to educate, propagate “scientific reason” and “moral enlightenment.” In 1914 the first sex hygiene film, \textit{Damaged Goods}, appeared as a product meant to teach America’s population about the threat of communicable diseases. According to Brandt, any underlying concerns about sexually transmitted diseases were “phobias of contamination by non-dominant social groups.”\footnote{Brandt, 22-23. Schaefer, \textit{Bold!}, 19.} The discourse around the venereal disease, once a door to dialogue was open, was centered on the image of the Low Other as shaped by Progressivism. By doing so, it promoted a certain apprehension towards industrialised cities, the outskirts, the working class, the new waves of immigrants, and ultimately encouraging a combination of racism and nativism within the middle and upper strata. Brandt underlines that the anxiety provoked by the reality of the disease combined with lack of knowledge about it evoked a certain belief that usual, brief, everyday encounters – such as at the grocery, in the park, at the barbershop – will pass on illnesses “originally obtained in ‘immoral’ circumstances” to the moral and native middle-class Americans. “Venereal diseases had become a disease of the Other, be it the other race, the other class, the other ethnic group.”\footnote{Brandt, 16, 22-23.} In his study from 1921, \textit{The Control of Sex Infections}, United States Representative J. Bayard Clark laid much of the blame for the spread of VD on modern industry and the working class. Clark pointed out the working girls from shops and factories, servants, “and those who idle at home” as responsible for most infections. He locates industrialism, which put young women to work while in “the flower of maternal possibility” as the source of the spread of venereal diseases.\footnote{Clark, 17.}

This also points out to the fact that the Other was not only a matter of class, geography, represented body, but also of gender. This is reflected in the sex hygiene films of the time, inasmuch as the character of a prostitute or a woman of “loose morals” is the one most likely to pass on the disease to a man of superior status. As the second part of the thesis will analyse, however, these films will make a very clear distinction between the prostitute/ working class
girl and the virtuous middle-class to-be-bride. Intended as lessons for couples and soon-to-be-families, sex health films generally constructed a dual image of femininity, each an epitome of a unidimensional moral stance. The Low Other was shaped in relation to the institutions meant to regulate it. This regulation had at its foundation the dualisms and contradictions of Progressivism, repugnance and fascination, the spiral of pleasure and power, all reflected on screen by an equally conflicting aesthetic. Conflicting, in the sense of a clash between modes of creating cinema so as to create propaganda, but also a type of cinema that exists in stark opposition to the mainstream narrative conventions. Ensuing ideology, style and form are the next layers to inform the construction of the Low Other in the sex hygiene film.

Henceforth, the delineation of hierarchies at the level of culture and social formation can be understood to occur in a larger ideological framework, one wherein the creation and examination of the Low Other are doubly validated. First, they are validated by science and secondly, by the filmic apparatus that replicates the medical and authorized institutional gaze. 131

131 Eberwein, 5.
The Construction of the Low Other in the Sex Hygiene Film

There are diverse ways into which the worthy and the unworthy come into play, combining and creating new forms of discourse. One of these representative sequences between high and low, repugnant and wholesome, is precisely the sex hygiene film. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault wrote:

> To be more precise, we must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one; but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies. It is this distribution that we must reconstruct...with the shifts and reutilization of identical formulas for contrary objectives that it also includes.\(^\text{132}\)

Elements of high and low, accepted and excluded discourse in the sex health film have been distributed and reorganized perpetually, precisely for contrary objectives. In fact, the sex hygiene film is fascinating on the account that it places itself on the edge between being officially approved and recommended by the dominant side and being rejected by the very same authority. In a society where Progressivism and Puritanism cohabit, forward-looking reforms are ambiguous, and disruption of the conspiracy of silence delicate. To understand the place the sex hygiene film occupied at the edge between high and low, it is of the essence to examine the aesthetic apparatus that constructed the image of the Low Other onto the screen. The sex hygiene style and form are similarly placed at the intersection of other modes of thinking and producing cinema. And it is *this* distribution that one must also reconstruct – the multiplicity of forms of discourse is reflective of the films’ conflicting nature. Sex hygiene films combine elements from various sources, such as documentary, fiction, medical footage. This flaunts a certain capacity to mold various elements into a hybrid, a collage that follows its own aesthetic rule.

As this second part of the thesis is trying to demonstrate, the organizing principle of sex hygiene movies was not the showcase of cinematic artistry, but the construction of a Low Other. And although there have existed objections to the predictable unfolding of narratives or the lack

\(^\text{132}\) Foucault, 100.
of elaborate camerawork implied in sex health movies, hygiene cinema’s purpose was not to be artistically pleasing. There was no attempt and no need for sex health propaganda to build rounded characters, use refined filming techniques or adhere to conventional rules of continuity.\textsuperscript{133} This peculiar mode of producing films at an early stage in film history is specific for the sex hygiene film as a branch and exploitation film as a whole. As Hollywood – the “high” of the film industry – was then stabilizing around the conventions of the feature-length narrative film, deviations or experiments outside of these conventions were considered “improper or inadequate.”\textsuperscript{134} Through the use of a discursive practice with a different trajectory than that of the conventional Hollywood product, sex hygiene films postulated a Low Other, but were also shaping themselves into the Low Other of the film industry. The aesthetics of the sex hygiene film will finally place sex health cinema in an unstable and unpredictable relation to the dominant powers of early filmmaking.

**A Cinema of Attractions**

The sex hygiene film represents the lesser-known and lesser-discussed inheritor of the timely cinema of attractions. According to Tom Gunning, the cinema of attractions is a cinema that “directly solicits spectator attention, inciting visual curiosity, and supplying pleasure through an exciting spectacle.” In his words, this spectacle is “a unique event, whether fictional or documentary, that is of interest in itself.”\textsuperscript{135} At the beginnings of cinema, footage of exotic landscapes, and burlesque dancers were paired in variety formats to attract audiences regardless of a narrative support. They had, as Gunning writes, an inherent “illusory power” that coupled with the novelty of the moving image itself and made them self-sufficient. And the element that reverberates from the cinema of attractions and into the sex hygiene film is precisely this “theatrical display [that] dominates over narrative absorption, emphasizing the direct stimulation of shock or surprise at the expense of unfolding a story or creating a diegetic universe.”\textsuperscript{136} Film generated an immediate reaction within the body, whether incitement, shock, or surprise, addressing directly one’s senses. And although the sex hygiene film did not reject


\textsuperscript{134} Schaefer, *Bold!*, 30.


\textsuperscript{136} Ibid.
the building of a fictional narrative per se, it did fragment this narrative so as to introduce elements of shock, fear, or anxiety, which momentarily surpassed in importance and even slowed down the unfolding of the plot.

Gunning writes: “In fact, the cinema of attractions does not disappear with the dominance of narrative, but rather goes underground, both into certain avant-garde practices and as a component of narrative films, more evident in some genres (e.g. the musical) than in others.”137 It can easily be argued, notwithstanding, that apart from the avant-garde (which sometimes needs a certain level of engagement and decoding from the viewer138) and particular moments within genre film, the cinema of attractions found a more congenerous inheritor in the sex hygiene and classic exploitation film, which subsequently share a similar inclination towards the fragmentation of narrative and the introduction of spectacle in the midst of story.139

Right before the apparition of the first sex hygiene film, in the period between 1907 and 1914, the narrativization of cinema and the apparition of the feature film occurred. Consequently, it replaced the variety format of the attraction program.140 A reason the sex hygiene pictures could have stood out so easily as a particular way of creating cinema in contrast to the Hollywood conventions – besides the taboo topics and the sense for propaganda – could have been precisely this “harnessing of visibility,” this adherence to certain elements specific to the cinema of attractions, both in form and in content, in a period when these were already considered obsolete. The cinema of attractions also engaged in a direct relationship with the audience – the actors break the illusion introduced by narrative film by looking into the camera and addressing the spectator directly. The attraction film is “willing to rupture a self-enclosed fictional world for a chance to solicit the attention of the spectator,”141 which the sex hygiene film sometimes adopted as well, as it pertained to its goal of lecturing the audience. Hence, early films wanted also to show, rather than simply be looked at. In the sex health film, however, this role of addressing the audience has a certain propagandistic bearing that straightforwardly plays on social anxieties. In fact, it can be argued that what transforms an attraction movie into a sex hygiene movie – besides the historical and social context in which the latter appear – is precisely the dimension of anxiety that they integrate. They have an inherent ability to use and

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137 Ibid., 382.
139 Schaefer, Bold!, 75-80.
140 Gunning, 385.
141 Ibid., 382.
manipulate social and political apprehension into a cinematic discourse that creates and continually re-shapes the Low Other. Thus, hygiene films are arguably one of the film branches to take forward the attraction film, but they accommodate within these attraction scenes a way of relating to the political landscape that is very specific.

A Cinema of Medical Footage and Documentary

One of the most evident stylistic features of the sex hygiene movies lays in their ability to meld fiction and documentary, insert excerpts of found footage that “aggressively [subject] the spectator to sensual or psychological impact” into a narrative structure that rejects classic conventions of continuity. Indeed, provided that Gunning names spectacle “a unique event, whether fictional or documentary, that is of interest in itself,” sex hygiene film manages to render considerable supplies of exhibitionism. There is documentary value within the medical reels introduced in hygiene movies, yet they simultaneously render significance as “attractions.” The inserts of hospital footage revealing the repercussions of sexually-transmitted diseases on the body convey 1) documentary information 2) a spectacle 3) a moral discourse that is delivered effortlessly once the spectator has been taken aback by the enticing force of the spectacle. Eberwein writes that “films and videos about sex and sexuality have the effect of riveting attention on the visible manifestation of the body in a way that makes the operation of invisible ideology all the more powerful.” Precisely because the spectator is incited, shocked, engulfed by the display of the human form and its transformation, it is less likely that he attends to the context that grants the framework for rendering the aftermaths of desire.

Provided that there was an extending of authorization to observe the effects of sex, as delineated in the prior chapter, this endorsement had itself a clearly delineated goal. The mesmerizing of the audience happened synchronously with monologues by authoritarian figures – such as characters of doctors, sometimes played by the doctors themselves – that imposed Progressivist ideologies through an element as direct and unconcealed as intertitles. Comparatively, both Damaged Goods and The Black Stork condemn in an undissembled way the Low Other for the “ills” of society through intertitle lectures. This occurs while the enthralling scenes of human form successively pertain to one’s senses, overturning one’s ability

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142 Ibid., 384.
143 Ibid.
144 Eberwein, 6.
to easily differentiate between the ideological groundwork and the spectacle. Especially since the period was one of allegedly substantial inhibition and prudishness, these propagandistic techniques could effectively abide.

There is a hypnotic quality that prevails through the medical footage made available to the public through sex health cinema. For one reason, this is due to the fact that there are no isolated sights of lacerations. On the contrary, these are perpetually shown in chains of patients, one after the other in full display of grotesque, open lesions. For another reason, because the given footage was sometimes included as a part of medical and war training programmes.\footnote{Ibid., 10.} This underlines the explicitness of the images projected in front of a heterogenous audience unfamiliarized to such prurient displays, notably presented under the authorized aegis of the government. The realness makes the repugnant images increasingly fascinating, and the intentional repetition of material augments this “showing off”, or “exhibitionism”, that consumes Crary’s observer. Provided that the modern spectator “observes” by complying to a set of rules, as Crary underlines, and that these rules pertain to an ideology responsible for the attempt of delineating a social Low Other, then the observer is not only he himself embedded in this ideological system, but he is part of the apparatus that constructs the Low Other. The voyeurism of the modern observer is met halfway by the sex hygiene movie, absorbing its desire to actively observe, and responding with scenes that have the capacity to both immerse and overwhelm him.

The ever-present image of the doctor offers the footage an accuracy mantel, but the sex hygiene movies often go even further so as to convince their auditorium of their authority and legitimacy. Namely, they feature photos, drawings and illustrations from anatomy encyclopedias (such is the case of Damaged Goods re-releases from 1917 onwards) as well as microscope shots observing venereal disease in the laboratory.\footnote{Ibid., 28-29.} The “microscopic motion picture” allowed “observers” to see inside the venereal disease infested body, partake into what only the doctor, the scientist could examine.\footnote{Ibid., 15.} Examples include films such as Fit to Win and Fit to Fight, used as instruction films in army training, yet given a theatrical release.\footnote{Ibid., 10.} The linkage of the camera to the microscope took the expository methods used by Damaged Goods a step further onto the realm of medicine. After the first rash of hygiene films in 1914 to 1915,
the practice of introducing medical inserts and medical discourse was eased either by building narrative situations around doctors as protagonists – such as will be the case of *The Black Stork* – or by having as main conflict the need to find a cure for disease – such as *The Scarlet Trail*.

Both through narrative and expository methods, these films directed the observer’s attention upon the representation of the Low Other. Nevertheless, this was frequently used to the detriment of the story in itself. As their function was to shock the viewer at the expense of leading the narrative forward, it is probably fair to say that the sex hygiene film was placed in an unstable relationship with conventional cinema from its very beginning. And not solely with mainstream cinema, but also with the critics who simultaneously demanded both education and entertainment from cinema.

**A Cinema of Education and Entertainment**

There was a duality of entertainment and education the sex hygiene film could not properly contain. But the fickle relationship between the two was first and foremost given by how production and distribution companies related to these notions of entertainment and education. First of all, it is important to understand that *one* sex hygiene movie could sometimes be used for *two* different purposes, or – if we take education as an overarching purpose – in two different projection circumstances. To give an example, a commercial film like *Damaged Goods*, which was initially given a theatrical release as an entertainment feature, was thereafter used by the U.S. Army and shown as an educative picture to the troops. In contrast, movies made specifically as sex hygiene instruction films for the military – including titles such as *Fit to Win*, *Fit to Fight*, and *The End of The Road* – were then distributed nationally as any other mainstream product.\(^{149}\) As most of them were commissioned and produced under state and medical supervision, sex hygiene films could freely circulate between the world of mainstream entertainment and military instruction, guided by medical discourse and teaching about, but also capitalizing on, the dangers of venereal disease.\(^{150}\) For a period within history when the Comstock Law was still theoretically in use, and knowledge of such matters very limited, the seductive nature of these films can only be hinted at by modern research. By authorizing one’s gaze *upon* and *within* the diseased bodies, using images that dwell on the margin of repugnance

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\(^{149}\) Ibid.

\(^{150}\) Ibid., 25.
and fascination, the sex hygiene picture posited a type of attraction that can be argued to have functioned as its own form of entertainment. And although, or precisely because, sex health film was distinct from the mainstream product tackling taboo topics, the success with the audience seems to have been considerable. This is hinted at by theatre managers’ testimonials and reviews of the time, but also by their “quality” of pictures that could be exploited.

Having this in mind, it is nonetheless unclear how much these displays started being used by the establishment for even greater profits as well, or if this was solely reserved for the exploitation practices following 1919. A review from a Detroit correspondent of *Moving Picture World* wrote about the *Damaged Goods* 1915 release:

> The Grand Circus only seats about 650, and the total daily attendance averaged 5,000 people. In the evenings, the crowd has been so large that three policemen were sent over by the police department to keep the people in line and from blocking the sidewalks.\(^{151}\)

After its three rereleases from 1915, 1917, and 1919, *Damaged Goods* was named by *Motion Picture News* “the biggest box-office attraction of a decade.”\(^{152}\) And, by this time, theatre managers’ statements from throughout the years were used as advertisements for the new rereleases of the movie. A declaration of H.M. Thomas of the Strand Amusement Company in Omaha, Nebraska read: “We had broken all records with *Damaged Goods*. We had to use seven policemen to handle the crowds.” The manager of Savoy Theatre in Wilmington, Delaware announced: “Had to call police to handle the crowds trying to get into the theatre last night. There were 300 people waiting in line when the theatre opened in the morning. *Damaged Goods* is the talk of the town.”\(^{153}\)

These sensationalist statements made public throughout the years, resembled and were ultimately used in promotional campaigns. But in the light of the alleged resounding success of *Damaged Goods*, it is possible that third party film companies tried to make use of the film and film’s name in such ways so as to gain more profit. Evidence has been found, in this sense, suggesting that sex hygiene films could have caught the eye of early exploiteers and potentially entered an alternative exhibition circuit as early as December 1915. This is relevant for the current discussion as the sex health film will fully relocate as a Low Other in this alternative production system, which was characterized specifically by recycling techniques. These include

\(^{151}\) Jacob Smith, “Damaged Goods Suit,” *Moving Picture World* 26, no.6 (October 30, 1915), 1002.

\(^{152}\) Advertisement of *Damaged Goods*, *Motion Picture News* 19, no. 15 (April 12, 1919), 2251.

\(^{153}\) Ibid.
reassembling of parts of sex hygiene movies into new products, changing of titles, misleading advertising.\footnote{Schaefer, Bold!, 42-43, 56-68. Wood and Feaster, 33-36.} The published statement reads as follows:

\textbf{WARNING to Exhibitors and Imitators of DAMAGED GOOD}

Every person who exhibits or advertises for exhibition any motion picture which purports to be based upon Damaged Goods or in any way related to Damaged Goods, or uses in the advertising of any other film, any reference to or colorable imitation of the advertising and publicity matter circulated on Damaged Goods is liable to suit for damages and prosecution for copyright infringement.

The photoplay version of Damaged Goods is owned under copyright by the American Film Company, Inc., and it is released only through the Mutual Film Corporation as a Mutual Special Feature. Legal remedy has been obtained against persons offering for rental to exhibitors imitations and infringements. Legal action will be instituted against any exhibitor exhibiting or advertising any such imitations of infringement.\footnote{Review of Damaged Goods, Motion Picture World 26, no. 12 (December 11, 1915), 1955. Review of Damaged Goods, Moving Picture News 12, no. 24 (December 18, 1915), 26.}

This warning published in both Motion Picture World and Motion Picture News hints not only at the desire to independently exploit such movies five years earlier than it is currently thought of by scholars, but also underlines the large attraction value of the sex hygiene motion picture. A connection can be made between the above warning and the “Damage Goods Suits” article published the same year, referring to an injunction being brought to Bell Film Exchange and associated individuals who brought patrons into theatres by advertising A Victim of Sin with posters of Damaged Goods, capitalizing on the latter’s success.\footnote{Jacob Smith, “Damage Goods Suits,” Moving Picture World 26, no. 6 (October 30, 1915), 1002.} What is of interest, besides the early copyright infringement in itself, is how by solely using the title of Damaged Goods one could earn additional profits. If all these articles and statements laid out together offer a sense of the excitement this film brought about, underneath all layers, they lay as evidence over the power of the taboo. Thus, it will be equally interesting to analyse, in the following chapters, what ideological layers could invisibly pertain to both this power and excitement.

In his work Film as a Subversive Art, Amos Vogel writes extensively on the power of the taboo in cinema. He writes that “the shock inevitably connected with the portrayal of a taboo object or act is significantly magnified in the case of film.” He writes that the ample dimension
of the image, moving in “bright space against a totally black background,” creates immediate tension within the observer. What’s more, when confronted by taboos such as sex or death on-screen, one feels “an element of risk and primordial danger, as if the image could [...] engulf us within its own reality.” This originates, Vogel underlines, from the palpable “actuality” of the image, its “revelation of the previously hidden, feared or desired.”

Vogel’s writing introduces, besides the conflictual notions of fear and desire, the element of death in relation to sex and the taboo. Similarly, the sex hygiene film exhibited taboos that linked sexual pleasure outside the marriage to unavoidable illness and a probable, fast-approaching death. Once more, Bataille wrote that “[u]nless the taboo is observed with fear it lacks the counterpoise of desire which gives its deepest significance.” Sex health film posited that, unless one follows the educational advice of the pictures, illness and potential death will ensue. Damaged Goods’ storyline ends on the brink of a suicide, Where are My Children? features the death caused by venereal disease of a young working class maid, The Scarlet Trail is about finding a cure against syphilis and the deaths it provokes, The Black Stork’s main focal point is the eugenic dying of “defective” infants, The End of the Road replicates the same suicide and madness scenes, so on and so forth. Thus, the entertainment component within sex hygiene pictures not only consisted of less-crafted storylines, and more of attraction sequences glued together by predictable plots, but they built up towards tragic narratives and calamitous endings that some reviewers did not find, in fact, entertaining at all.

These matters will all be discussed within more detail in the next chapter.

There existed, on the other hand, an active effort to envelop the attraction and tragic moments – regardless how gratuitous – in an educative layer. So as to canvas the attraction content with an educational facade, producers relied on the so-named technique of the “square-ups.” Square-ups were statements placed at the beginning of films that denounced a certain problem existing within society, such as the spreading of venereal disease, as well as how the movie was going to expose and propose a solution for the given problem. In Kathleen Karr’s terms, “[f]he general approach to the square-up was to state at a film’s beginning that such and such an evil existed (unfortunately), and that its existence necessitated exposure so that the

158 Bataille, 36.
159 “Sex Hygiene Picture More Preachment than Play,” The Film Daily 11, no. 81 (December, 29 1918), 14.
160 Schaefer discusses in detail the square-up as stock material heavily used by exploitation producers from the 1920s until the end of the 1950s. However, he adjacently notes that these started being used in movies as early as 1912. Schaefer, Bold!, 71-73.
aforementioned evil could be eradicated once and for all from the face of the earth.”¹⁶¹ Thus, square-ups overturned the preposterous attractions into educative moments. The more explicit the material that followed was, the more denouncing of the evils of the world the square-ups were as well. And while a Progressivist ethos towards education pardoned shocking content as necessary for the “eradication of social evil”, lectures around the screenings would also be organized so as to educate audiences in regards to venereal disease problems or eugenics, occasionally delivered by the very doctors who starred in or proposed them.¹⁶²

Thus, by means of medical discourse, the on-screen ubiquitous presence of a physician, the use of square-ups, and lectures organized around the movies through “social betterment associations,” sex hygiene films were used by Progressivists as propagators of medical truth, offering information about social issues to a society whose access to such data was previously denied. One can argue it represented a sort of defiance of the Comstock Law of 1873, but a violation defended by a dominant system of interconnections between the social sphere, the medical, the technological, and the institutional, which represent the exact same centres of power Foucault sees dominating over the technology of sex.¹⁶³ By means of medical footage, spectators were authorized by the dominant power to observe and discuss the health risks of intercourse, which resembles at once a progressive and Progressivist step forward. But while audiences were offered this possibility, they were also given a concealed legitimization to observe and assimilate an ideological Low Other. Eberwein wrote that the sex hygiene movie represents the beginning of a relationship between audiences and representations of the sexual body. It will now be further analysed, however, the manner in which that sexual body was always pertaining to the social Low Other. At the very same time, the sex hygiene movie itself was gradually transgressing from the establishment to the world of the cultural Low Other. While this part of the second chapter discussed sex health films at the intersection between the world of medical discourse, education, and attraction, the following case studies will discuss their intersection with ideology.

¹⁶³ Foucault, 116.
**Damaged Goods (1914, 1915): A Progressivist Phenomenon**

Being banned at the time of its release in 1901, Eugene Brieux’s play *Les Avariés* was staged for the first time in New York City in 1913 under the title *Damaged Goods*. The performance was shortly followed by a screen version produced in 1914 by the American Film Manufacturing Company, distributed by Mutual Film Company as a “special feature,” and supervised by medical authorities such as the *Medical Review of Reviews*.\(^{164}\) This was to establish the medically and scientifically approved nature of the film, as well as prevent puritan riots from taking place. Both the play and the movie openly brought about the topic of venereal infections and the harm syphilis could bring to American families. After the suppression of all information on sexual health and the inscribing of a powerful taboo around the topic of sexually transmitted diseases, *Damaged Goods* was received as a progressive step forward. In fact, Allan M. Brandt names *Damaged Goods* the symbol of a “new sexual openness.”\(^{165}\) Consequently, the film witnessed considerable success in 1914, being rereleased as soon as 1915 with an additional cinema circuit of eight to nine months.\(^{166}\) Rereleases occurred time and again in 1917, 1919, and finally in 1935. And although the version of 1914 is believed to be lost, reviews published in the trade publications of the time provide the necessary information regarding the scenes subsequently altered by censorship. The core plot of the movie has otherwise remained identical throughout the rereleases.

Upon withdrawing all copies from the market in 1916, Mutual published an advertisement in *The Moving Picture World* that impressionistically read: “*Damaged Goods* made more money for more exhibitors than any other feature of equal magnitude in the history of pictures *[sic]*.”\(^{167}\) In another issue, they state they have received “more than 100,000 testimonials from men and from women in all circles of society [...] who have been impressed with its extraordinary educational value.”\(^{168}\) *The Moving Picture World* called the 1914 version

\(^{164}\) The “Mutual Special Feature” label can be found in all *Damaged Goods* advertisements of published in 1915 and 1916 in *The Moving Picture World, Motion Picture News*, and *Reel Life*.

\(^{165}\) Brandt, 47.

\(^{166}\) On July 22, 1916, Mutual Film Company announced the withdrawal of all copies from projection spaces on the 1st of September of the same year. This has come in preparation of the 1917 re-release of the same movie, whose campaign started as soon as the end of 1916. *The Moving Picture World* 29, no.4 (July 22, 1916), 586.


\(^{168}\) Besides the prospect of it being a mere distribution campaign, their listing of twenty such testimonials includes solely ovations from theatre managers, presidents of educational societies, and chairmen of national conferences on sex hygiene issues. Thus, contradictory to their statement, only the upper strata were interviewed and cited. Advertising of *Damaged Goods*, *Reel Life*, (February 3, 1917) 2-3.
“a vital drama of moral uplift,” *Washington Post* observed that it was “staged with great attention to detail and with the delicate plot handled in a way to produce the most telling effect,” while a reviewer from *The New York Telegraph* noted that “the effect of the play is wholesome.” In light contrast, the reviewer of the *Globe-Democrat* newspaper of St. Louis, wrote that the movie was rather a “photoplay sermon,” a “frank, but pathetic prayer for a clean life,” more of a bad movie with an otherwise good cause.

Authorities and health officials, on the other hand, shared enthusiastic declarations with *The Motion Picture News*. A Health Officer in D.C. insisted that “the sooner the community comes to realize the dangers that threaten the home, the unborn child, and the race through unregulated or ill-regulated marriages the sooner will a remedy be applied.” The President of the New York City Federation of Women’s Clubs backed that *Damaged Goods* “should be seen by all parents, young men and young girls. There are awful truths brought to light which should be heeded.” While the screenings allowed male and female audiences alike, some voices underlined that even children should be brought along to watch the movie. The frenzy surrounding *Damaged Goods* was nonetheless influenced by how the movie aligned itself with the Progressivist mores. And those were, as demonstrated by Link and McCormick, contradictory.

*Damaged Goods* tells the story of George Dupont, a young lawyer “of an excellent home” who participates in a bachelor’s party thrown for him by his friends. He drinks, spends the night with a sex worker “against his own desires,” and contracts syphilis from a “momentary failing of standards.” Upon visiting his doctor, George is advised to wait for two years, get full treatment for the disease, and only then proceed and marry the virtuous Henriette, “a prominent society belle.” Although he is shown the effects of the disease on patients – in what represents the first expository scene in a sex hygiene film – George ignores the warnings of his doctor. Instead, he follows the advice of a quack physician and marries. The baby is born with syphilis, and the film ends with the main character on the brink of committing...

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171 Review of *Damaged Goods*, *Motion Picture News* 12, no. 8 (October 2, 1915), 43.
173 Review of *Damaged Goods*, *Variety* 11, no. 4 (September 24, 1914), 56.
176 Review of *Damaged Goods*, *Variety* 60, no. 5 (October 1, 1915), 18.
suicide. Highly moralizing, *Damaged Goods* features one last monologue held by the doctor, rendered through intertitles, and directly addressing the audience, on the awareness of venereal disease and on the temptations that transpire from “the streets.”

First and foremost, what has already been identified in relation to sex hygiene film is that each character embodies a moral stance. Thus, one can argue that an initial method for establishing where the good and the evil lay in the picture is by creating unidimensional characters whose actions, motivations, background, and morals are over-simplified. Eric Schaefer has identified five major character typologies within the early hygiene film, out of which three pertain most directly to *Damaged Goods* and the current discussion. The protagonist is identified as “The Innocent,” a young man or woman who has little knowledge of sexual matters and “the ways of the world,” and whose gullible way of being leads him or her to contract syphilis and/or pass it forward to his/her decent family. “The Corrupter” is the one to lead the Innocent astray, down a path both physically and morally harmful. The Corrupter is generally a prostitute or a “loose woman” who gives young men venereal disease, but can also be represented by friends or acquaintances who push the Innocent to drink alcohol, smoke cigarettes, or visit a brothel. In the case of *Damaged Goods*, the corrupters are both the prostitute and the friends encouraging George Dupont to drink. What’s more, the Innocent always finds himself or herself in the need of visiting a physician, who is “The Crusader,” almost always a male doctor. He represents the main authority in the movie, beholds the moral and scientific truth, and is the one who offers and often battles for the proper education of the Innocent. On the side, he either supports birth control, eugenic breeding, fights venereal disease, abortion, or a combination of all. The Crusader is often in opposition with the quack doctors who offer flawed advice in exchange for quick income. More than this, he is most often the character who breaks the fourth wall, and directly addresses the audience through lecturing intertitles.

According to Kuhn, this lecturing occurs as audiences were thought of as occupying an identical position of “ignorance and moral corruptibility” as the fictional characters. Thus, spectators did not merely identify with the protagonist, who was also reflecting their moral and social position, but were also learning about “the ways of life” and the threat of sexually transmitted diseases at the same time with the fictional character. In their turn, these characters acting as vessels of moral stances, replicate the same narrow trajectory with every

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179 Ibid., 108.
movie, in a repetitive act which underlines the educational and potentially propagandistic scope of the pictures. The Innocent will always find himself or herself into trouble, require medical instruction, and upon his failing to follow the advice of the medical authority, tragic consequences follow. The educational element, the authoritative lecturing within these pictures was extremely evident, yet this education heeled on Progressivism, notions of hierarchy, dual axes of gender and class.\textsuperscript{180}

And while the movie does not directly point out the existence of a Low Other, what it does is warn the bourgeois about the dangers thatloom in the background and can transpire into their world, if not attentive. Indeed, Damaged Goods functions as a warning in regards to the ills that can be inflicted on the bourgeois in the case of lowering one’s guard. With a straightforward narrative, the first sex hygiene film fundamentally tells the same old story from the concert saloons, where the wealthy men would spend the evening with “waiter girls,” then inflict diseases onto their families. Damaged Goods easily inspired several of such movies to be produced, such as A Victim of Sin, or The Price He Paid. The plot was customarily the same, as was the interaction between characters, and some movies even duplicated Damaged Goods scene by scene.\textsuperscript{181} The reviewers briefly quoted in the Damaged Goods summary above, in their turn, exhibit a certain way of analysing the social status of the protagonist, as well as pardoning his act. The reviewers, and thus probably the film itself, portrayed the sexual interaction as if imposed from the outside, an unfortunate event resulting from the protagonist’s inebriated state.

Indeed, a first narrative element that helps create a contrast between social strata, by their sudden and “unfortunate” juxtaposition, is alcohol. The Progressivists were in favour of Prohibition policies, and so a triggering element of the momentary falling in disgrace in Damaged Goods is alcohol. Epitomizing the lowering of inhibition, alcohol perpetually appears in sex hygiene films before any sexual interaction occurs. According to Clark, as well as Brandt, alcohol was often cited as a contributing factor in the spread of venereal disease in the discourse of the period, sex health films being no exception.\textsuperscript{182} In Damaged Goods, as in many other movies produced in the frenzy of its success, the consumption of alcohol was not only frequent – and frequently disapproved of – but also led to the bourgeois character’s “falling of standards”

\textsuperscript{180} Schaefer, Bold!, 31.
\textsuperscript{181} It appears that A Victim of Sin depicted the story of a bourgeois medical student about to marry the daughter of a prominent banker. As he spends a night drinking with his friends, he subsequently sleeps with a “loose woman” and contracts syphilis. Upon ignoring his doctor’s mentoring, he leaves his fiancée pregnant and the child dies soon after birth. “Injunction against Film Based on Damaged Goods,” Motion Picture News 12, no. 19 (November 13, 1915), 68.
\textsuperscript{182} Clark, 40-43; Brandt, 58-60, 72.
and engagement in sexual acts with the lower class. In Schaefer’s words: “The audience was encouraged to view drinking as wrong not because of some innate moral doctrine or sin but because it broke down social discriminations, allowing a mingling of the classes.”\textsuperscript{183} Fueled by Progressivist beliefs, the fear of the working class was now shaped into an educational value. The mix between classes, as it has been discussed in the previous chapters, was not a new fear of the bourgeoisie. “Sanitizing” theatre halls meant eliminating the working class and the rowdiness that came with it from the “high” culture space. Concert saloons were not safe because they featured alcohol and men of the upper-class would find themselves in the company of “waiter girls”. In cinema too, such projects as “daylight screenings” were battling the “moral evils” happening in darkened theatres between spectators of different upbringings.\textsuperscript{184}

The result of such intermingle was shown in Damaged Goods as well. And these are precisely the scenes some reviewers remained with the most – the visit along the hallways of the hospital, the display of wounds and infections caused by syphilis. This is the key scene of the movie, as the doctor tries to make George Dupont aware of the scale of the disease. Moreover, his is the first known of film in which a doctor shows another character the effects of venereal disease on the body. In Frank Thomson’s Lost Films one can find reviews following the 1914 film’s premiere. Published in the 26th September 1914 issue of Motography, one review underlines states that George Dupont sees “with his own eyes the horrible results of marriages [...] the little creatures, old from birth, ninety-two perfect of whom die but many of whom grow up to be imbeciles and idiots.”\textsuperscript{185} On the same version of the movie, one reviewer from Variety noted:

The ravages of syphilis were shown in patients, their limbs exposed, and to make the impression indelible, book illustrations from medical works were thrown upon the screen. You can’t get away from that display. It spells insanity, infirmity, and death from a scourge that eats the flesh while the afflicted one is waiting for the end.\textsuperscript{186}

Another Variety article read that Damaged Goods depicts “the repulsive yet actual results of syphilis, and brings home the facts for universal inspection stripped of all its social and technical masks. What may be repulsive to the few is undeniable educational to the many.” From the first

\textsuperscript{183} Schaefer, Bold!, 23.
\textsuperscript{184} Olsson, 230-251.
\textsuperscript{186} Review of Damaged Goods, Variety 36, no.4 (September 26, 1914), 22.
two reviewers we get an idea of what the scenes looked like – and they are precisely the type of scenes exploiteers would then steal and capitalize on. They are grotesque images of an inflicted Low Other – inflicted by way of sexual intercourse – held in an institution remote from the sight of the decent citizens. Going back to Foucault, he noted that the insane, the sexual deviants and sexual inflicted are offered only two spaces in which they are allowed to exist, and those are the brothel and the hospital. The prostitute in Damaged Goods belonged to one, the patients to the other. When sexuality goes outside the realm of marriage, which was also the realm of the “normal” at the time Foucault was writing, it risked slipping into the realm of the “abnormal” which it thus delineated.187 Such is the case of George Dupont, who is granted momentary access to the world that awaits him if not seeking treatment. He observes, and the audience observes, in a voyeuristic experience of repugnance and fascination, a hidden world. It is a hidden world of those who did not have the knowledge or the financial means to seek care in due time.

Damaged Goods is an excellent example of a dominant discourse creating and exposing a Low Other. The scene with George walking through the hallways of physically and mentally impaired patients creates the same hierarchies Stallybrass and White write about. There is the opposition between the clean, healthy body, and the ill, grotesque one, the mentally abled and disabled, the periphery and the centre, the bourgeoisie and the lower class. It is similar to a carnivalesque exposition of open wounds and orifices, which the high finds repelling, but also necessary to observe so as to know what not to become. More than this, the observation can be uncomfortable at the level of sight, but comfortable when there exists a safe distance between the spectator and the Low Other on the screen. And just as the characters are unidimensional, the perspective is only one. At no point is the audience offered another perspective besides that of George Dupont and the doctor. On the contrary, the monologue is that of the physician, the figure of authority, the so-named Crusader who holds the educational truth for both George and the audience. The book illustrations presented on-screen, in combination with the medical footage, is made to offer a certain credibility and authority to the movie itself. The doctor is also the only character who breaks the illusion of the fourth wall and returns at the end of the movie to offer its audience one last piece of educational advice.

When writing about the position of the doctor in the 1919 version of Damaged Goods, Annette Kuhn singles out that the doctor occupied a “privileged” place, as his discourse

187 Foucault, 4.
motivated the succession of images, intertitles, book illustrations. His speech was also shot in a variation of close-ups, which rendered additional credibility when addressing the audience. One cannot make such claims about the types of shots in the 1914 version, unless more reviews from the date following the release of the movie were found to depict these shots. Nonetheless, is probably worth mentioning that doctors of the period did have a special place within society. Allan Brandt notes:

Recent scientific advances concerning the pathology and treatment of venereal diseases granted physicians new stature and increased authority in the assessment of a variety of related problems from the changing role of the family and marriage to sex roles and morality.¹⁸⁹

During Progressivism, doctors as representatives of science took over the power the clerics had in the past.¹⁹⁰ That is, power negotiating what is considered to be moral, immoral, normal and deviant, in terms of marriage and reproduction. Kuhn also writes that “V.D. propaganda films [...] participate in the discursive and institutional construction of public health by authorizing – literally, by giving authority to – science as a means of securing the health of the public (for the social, as much as the sexual) body”.¹⁹¹ Thus, doctors are given the authority, or even the obligation, to expose the Low Other and keep the middle- and upper-class safe from the illnesses that can transgress from the lower class if not being careful. The image of the doctor followed by an array of illustrations, footage, and microscope imagery, represented a staple for sex hygiene propaganda. What’s more, the physician was only to gain more authority within the landscape of cinema.

**The Black Stork (1917): A Multiplicity of Discourse**

After the success witnessed by *Damaged Goods*, films concerned solely with the topic of venereal disease started being produced in cycles. The period of 1916 and 1917 witnessed the appearance of a marginally different breed of sex health films. Concerned directly with the subject matter of eugenics in relation to venereal disease and other afflictions, motion pictures

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¹⁸⁸ Kuhn, *Cinema, Censorship, and Sexuality*, 57.
¹⁸⁹ Brandt, 8.
¹⁹⁰ Kuhn, *Cinema, Censorship, and Sexuality*, 57.
¹⁹¹ Ibid., 59.
such as *The Black Stork* displayed more directly their belief in, and anxiety towards, the 
conspiracy of the race suicide. Deeply implanted in social controversy, the films of this cycle 
drew on highly debated events of the period, such as the condemnation of Margaret Sanger for 
distribution of birth control information or the John Bollinger case of lethal eugenics. And, 
even if the sex hygiene film split into two directions concerned with two seemingly different 
issues, the underlying eugenic foundation was the very same – the films encouraged and 
propagated methods for the bettering of human breeding. In the case of *The Black Stork*, the 
hierarchies between different types of “human stock” were constructed around the case of the 
Bollinger baby, the syphilitic newborn who was refused potentially lifesaving treatment by Dr. 
Haiselden and left to die, so as to “save” him from a life of unhappiness, according to the film, 
as well as to stop the “breeding” of “bad stock.” The film combines documentary and fiction in 
a way that pertains to its propagandistic scope, but that also permits contemporary viewers a 
closer revisitation of a somber episode in American history.

*The Black Stork* was released during the height of eugenics, circulated under the name 
*Are You Fit to Marry?* from 1918 onwards, and was offered a second rerelease under the same 
title in 1927. The film was also produced by Wharton, Inc. under contract with renowned 
magnate William Randolph Hearst’s newly established International Film Service, and casted 
Haiselden as the crusader doctor in the movie. And although the film lacked any big-name 
actors, the name of Haiselden at the height of the Bollinger case was as widespread as that of 
any high profile actor. Indeed, in an advertisement from February 10th, 1917, distributor 
Sheriott Pictures Corporation announced:

For more information on the Margaret Sanger case see David M. Kennedy, *Birth Control in America: The 
Career of Margaret Sanger* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970). For more information on the John 
Medical Journal* 102, no. 23 (December 4, 1915): 1132. Also see articles of the period such as “Baby a Day 

Even in the case the birth control sex hygiene pictures, such as *Where are My Children?*, famous for its support 
of women’s right, the foundation lay still within the belief of a better human stock. The film’s intertitles read that 
the lower classes, the unfit, “were breeding at a rate which threatened the extinction of the best elements of the 
race” while bourgeois women, “the best type,” were not. Shelly Stamp states that “*Where Are My Children?* makes 
the case that poverty-stricken women ought to practice birth control in order to limit the size of their families, 
whereas women of wealth and good breeding were selfish if they chose to remain childless.” Shelly Stamp, 

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194 Pernick, 6.

195 Pernick, 151.
From November 1915 until May 1916, the newspapers of the world devoted more space to Dr. Haiselden than to the President of the United States, because the surgeon refused to operate to prolong the life of a misshapen, morally deficient baby. With the release of The Black Stork, Dr. Haiselden [...] will receive more publicity than the action upon which the picture is based caused originally. [...] It is a real photoplay with an eminent, widely advertised surgeon as the star.196

This flamboyant advertisement exhibits the eugenic belief that disability equaled “moral deficiency” – which was the equivocal eugenic term for lawlessness and criminality – a belief the film also displays most intensely.197 What’s more, it emphasizes the increasing importance of the doctor and of the medical authoritative discourse within the world of cinema. As it still inscribed in the category of sex hygiene propaganda, what The Black Stork did was not merely expose the objective scientific facts of this ethically dubious practice, but also try and persuade people to change their personal choices and behaviour through a series of cinematic techniques. And while within the medical world debates over the ethics and righteousness of this method arose, the film critics remained rather imperceptive or callous in regards to the ethical problems raised by the manner in which the cinematic medium was being used.198 Thus, supportive reviews named the film a “powerful”199 and “enlightening”200 picture, featuring “a “cleverly worked plot” which offered audiences “more than a clinical value.”201 Variety underlined the educational worth of the hygiene picture, stating that “[i]t is bound to make one stop and think – think real hard.”202 The Chicago Tribune, on the other hand, agreed that “the ideas may be all right,” but considered the film “as pleasant to look at as a running sore.”203 Similarly, renown columnist Louella Parsons wrote that The Black Stork was “neither a pretty nor a pleasant picture [...] it shows poor, misshapen bodies of miserable little children,”204 while The Exhibitor’s Trade Review noted that the images of “repulsive defectives” did not provide entertainment value.205 What is striking, for the modern reader of these reviews, is that critics located the problem of the movie primarily in its lack of entertainment, rather than (what was

196 Review of The Black Stork, Motion Picture News 15, no. 6 (February 10, 1917), 854.
197 Leonard, 208.
198 For an impressive reassembly of medical controversies and Health Board disputes see: Pernick, 3-18.
199 Review of The Black Stork, Motography 17, no.8 (February 24, 1917), 424.
201 Review of The Black Stork, Motography 17, no.8 (February 24, 1917), 424.
understood later as) its unethical display of disabled children.\textsuperscript{206} In turn, Edward Weitzel of the *Motion Picture World* wrote that “about the only audience that the picture might be shown to would be a class of advanced medical students [...] The revelation of such a subject is of vital importance to humanity, but only under proper conditions; these conditions are not to be found within the walls of a moving picture theater.”\textsuperscript{207} As a response to these criticisms, M.E. Mazur, the general manager of the distribution company Sheriott Pictures Corporation, told *Motography* that *The Black Stork* was “not a propaganda picture, but rather a living document calculated to teach as great a lesson as that preached in the churches – moral cleanliness.” He stated that the picture represents “entertainment for the multitude” and that “it is incidental that a great moral lesson is taught.”\textsuperscript{208} And while this reflects already an inherent separation between theatrical and non-theatrical cinema, the manner in which this hybrid film was constructed so as to convince people to practice “moral cleanliness” is of interest.

As stated above, *The Black Stork* is a docufiction in which Dr. Haiselden plays the character of Dr. Dickey who, as in the Bollinger case, chooses to convince the parents of the baby born with congenital syphilis to let the infant die, rather than perform a potentially life-saving surgery. Thus, the film focuses on the story of Claude and Anne, an “unfit” couple to give birth to a diseased child. The audience finds out from the opening intertitle that Claude is “blessed with wealth and position,” but has inherited “the blood taint of an indiscreet ancestor.” He confesses to Dr. Dickey that the unnamed “indiscretion” was miscegenation, and the “blood taint,” syphilis. He explains that his grandfather had a black slave, referred to in the intertitle as “a vile filthy creature who was suffering from a loathsome disease,” with whom he had intercourse “in a drunken stupor.” The alcohol, once more, functions as a dangerous mediating element precipitating the wealthy to lower his (because he was almost always male) guard, and fornicate with a lower class woman. Just as in *Damaged Goods*, the carrier of the disease is female, considered of an “inferior” status and, in this case, also race. Upon reviewing the film, *Moving Picture World* remarked on the racial aspect in equally racist terms, writing: "The story

\textsuperscript{206} It is fair to say that in 1917 the act of performing a disability was being separated by critics from the actual showing of disability on-screen, even if age or ethics were not being discussed. See: “The Black Stork,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 12, 1917, 18. “The Black Stork,” *The Film Daily* 9, no. 11 (April 15, 1917), 220. Actual condemnation regarding such displays arose in 1932 with the release of *Freaks* (Tod Browning, 1932) and its invitation to gaze upon the disabled in attraction-like fashion. See “Freaks,” *The New York Times*, July 9, 1932, 7. Otherwise, actual scholarship has only recently begun to closely investigate issues such as the ethics of representation of disability in cinema. See Ann Pointon, Paddy Masefield, Chris Davies, *Framed: Interrogating Disability in the Media* (London: British Film Institute, 1997).

\textsuperscript{207} Edward Weitzel, Review of *The Black Stork*, *The Moving Picture World* 17, no. 8 (February 24, 1917), 1211.

\textsuperscript{208} “States’ Rights on the Black Stork,” *Motography* 17, no. 17, 880.
shows the source of the taint to have been in a slave woman, which, of course, means the contamination is of a double character,” adding that “[t]he inclusion of the color question will give Southern exhibitors pause.” And, indeed, the producers had ultimately replaced the slave with a similarly “dirty” white servant within the 1927 version of the film. But the film’s process of establishing the Low Other did not stop at locating the source of venereal disease in the slave woman. The same establishing sequence introduces Dr. Dickey, a “crusader for race betterment,” looking out the window and smiling at the sight of a group of bare-chested boys wrestling. As a black handicapped child passes by, the kids stop and stare, the doctor saddens, a close-up lingers on the boy’s face, and an intertitle reads: “As its babies, so is the nation.” The contrast between the white, healthy children, and the ill black boy, is as obvious as the nationalistic incentive. The fictional moment conjures at once medical, social, and political elements. On a slightly subtler note, the title itself creates a connection between blackness and hereditary deficiency, as every intertitle in the film is being framed by the illustration of two black storks. Intertitles, of course, are of an elemental importance for a silent film aiming to persuade its audience to adjust its behaviour: they constitute the direct address of authority framed in a fictional narrative. Hence, this illustrated metaphor of the black stork is most likely not incidental. The fact that the title was replaced and the given drawings disappeared in the 1927 version of the film can also be seen as confirming this reading.

The film continues by pointing out the “defective human stock” that can permeate the world of the bourgeois once the blood has been “tainted.” The film’s first and longest expository moment, in which the doctor brings children with various disabilities in front of the camera, is also the scene that bears the biggest attraction significance, tracing back to as early as Pathé’s *The Little Cripple* (*Le petit béquillard*, 1908). So as to integrate the shots within the fictional narrative, however, Dr. Dickey is to show a group of opulently dressed visitors, Claude being one of them, the effects of “unfit” marriages. One by one, children are brought in front of the camera and, after each lingering close-up examining the figures and the disabilities of the children, an explanatory dialogue reproduced as intertitle follows. A toddler is brought first: “This is a microcephalic baby with only a shadow of a brain. At its birth, doctors worked three hours to save its life – for this poor unfortunate, the worst is yet to come.” The visitors flaunt

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210 Images of bare-chested and naked boys, as well as images of athletic bodies, are regularly inserted within the film so as to contrast the appearance of the disabled. They also represented the eugenic ideal of beauty, whereas the black, the impaired, the mentally ill, were deemed “ugly,” in a chain of perpetual contrasts made to add supplemental layers to the image of the Low Other. For more on eugenic beauty standards see: Pernick, 60-66.

211 Pernick, 57.
terrified expressions. The next is an autistic boy, turned around in front of the camera, in what Eberwein would call “an appropriation of the medical gaze.” The intertitle reads: “A very common type of mental deficiency.” A sixteen year old with a mental disorder is introduced next, a close-up of her laughter made to inflict fear onto the audience on-screen (the visitors) and off-screen. But what happens from a modern perspective, as Pernick points out, is that the girl seems to be flirting with the camera as if pretending to be a movie-star, holding a hand on her hip, and breaking the fourth-wall, as well as the narrative layer. As eugenicists of the time warned precisely against intercourse with an ill-matched partner, the imagery of a mentally deficient adolescent being flirtatious to the spectator could have appeared as straightforwardly terrifying. From a modern standpoint, however, this moment humanizes the girl, while the potential feelings of revulsion the movie is trying to build on, momentarily dissipate. What follows is the deeply melodramatic introduction of an impaired boy, in a chair, holding a pair of pants, and addressing one of the lady visitors: “these are running pants, m’am. When I get well, I’ll need them to run races with the rest of the boys.” The nurse promptly replies that he is “a hopeless cripple,” to which the doctor adds: “Death is sometimes one’s best friend.” In only one short moment, there is already a strong contrast generated by the pairing of the boy’s hopes and his abilities, quickly turned into pity, then instantly offered a tragic definitive statement, offered by the doctor as cardinal source of knowledge. The emotional manipulation found at the intersection of medical displays and a melodramatic sequence of intertitles finds its peak in The Black Stork. But the repeated mingling of fear, pity, and tragedy throughout the plot, offered an inescapable sense of anxiety that the classical Hollywood narrative of entertainment could no longer contain.

This is also a scene reflective of Foucault’s “technology of sex,” in which “the medical examination, the psychiatric investigation, the pedagogical report” have the seeming objective of saying “no” to deviances. However, as Foucault notes, “they function as mechanisms with a double impetus: pleasure and power,” namely “[t]he pleasure that comes of exercising a power that questions, monitors, watches, spies, searches out, palpates.” Through what Eberwein calls the “appropriation of the medical gaze,” this impetus of pleasure and power is transferred

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212 Eberwein names “the appropriation of the medical gaze” the moments in which narrative cinema either overlaps with medical footage, film used for medical instruction, or in which cinema reproduces photographs or videos of microscopic images, as if the camera was a microscope itself. Through extension, “the appropriation of the medical gaze” also includes the conferring of authorization to the spectator to observe patients as if from the position of a doctor. Eberwein, 5.
213 Pernick, 145.
214 Foucault, 45.
to the audience watching the Low Other in fear, repugnance, and fascination. As Damaged Goods, The Black Stork was a feature-length educational melodrama in its system of emotional excess, episodic presentation, and authoritative tone, but The Black Stork used a greater dosage of shock, fear, and revulsion as central persuasive techniques. Of course, these melodramatic and propagandistic methods laid in constant tension with the objective and scientific appearance expected of medicine and the medical discourse. Pernick writes that “[t]he melodramatic style, with its flamboyant histrionics, was poorly adapted to the explication of subtle scientific concepts. And the melodrama’s demand for clearly labeled villains and heroes emphasized personal guilt and individual morality at a time when medical science claimed to seek amoral technical causes and cures.”

Thus, the multiplication of discourse happened both at the level of cinematic aesthetic structure, where borrowing elements from conflictual modes of making cinema represented a way to bricolage a persuasive film, but also at the level of authority, where new ways of studying and regulating one’s sexual behaviour were discovered.

**The End of the Road (1919): An Inverted Hierarchy**

Regardless of the overall aesthetic discontent generated by The Black Stork, the film continued to show throughout the early 1920s. The backlash against the sex hygiene films of 1918 and 1919, on the other hand, was definite. While 1918 films such as The Scarlet Trail were commended for being cleaner than their “morbid” 1917 predecessor, inasmuch as the effects of venereal disease were displayed on adults – in a similar manner to that of Damaged Goods – or not at all, the “entertainment value” was still being written of as “register[ing] somewhere near the zero mark.” Indeed, The Film Daily pointed out that the films’ “severe handicap” was their inability to “awake interest in their characters,” as they embody moral positions to the point “they don’t get to you as real human beings.” And while it is true that characters in the sex hygiene film are unidimensional, a film like The End of the Road still drew unexpected crowds to the theaters. Its premiere in New York gathered fifteen hundred spectators alone, it played

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215 Pernick, 120.
216 On the base of its “inhuman” treating of infants and its “most unpleasant,” “very distressing,” “most revolting” depictions of disease, the film was rejected by the New York State Motion Picture Division only in 1923. For more on the role sex-hygiene films played in the growth of film censorship, see: Kuhn, Cinema, Censorship, and Sexuality. Edward de Grazia and Roger K. Newman, Banned Films: Movies, Censors and the First Amendment (New York: Bowker, 1982).
“to capacity” a 12-week run in Brooklyn in a double-feature format together with *Fit to Win* (a similarly banned film of 1919), and it was scheduled with two shows a day in Philadelphia.\(^{218}\)

Regardless of its distribution success, the reactions against the movie were severe. As censorship grew stronger, police orders were placed against *The End of The Road* and the film became illegal to exploit inside or outside the mainstream distribution system. *Exhibitors Herald and Motography* wrote ample material on how the efforts made by NAMPI “to invoke the state and municipal laws to stop the showing of *The End of the Road,*” ultimately led to the film’s increase in popularity.\(^{219}\) At the same time, distributors made efforts into advertising the film specifically as “not a propaganda picture,”\(^{220}\) but were contravened by other trade publications making clear that “this film, dealing with social evils, was produced by the United States Government during the war, for showing at the army cantonments a moral lesson,” and was thus not appropriate for commercial exhibition.\(^{221}\) It represented a non-theatrical film that was offered a theatrical release, similar to how *Damaged Goods*, initially intended for a general audience, was eventually projected in non-theatrical settings. There was a certain role-reversal the film exhibited, which subsequently permeated to its very core.

Stacie Colwell, who has carefully analysed the production and reception of the film, argues instead that once the urges of the war had ended, little institutional support was still offered to *The End of the Road* that could sustain the film’s continuation in the commercial sphere.\(^{222}\) And while this is partly contradicted by the film’s commercial success, the demise of the 1919 films appears to be of a more layered nature. In fact, the sparked controversy led to the commissioning of a study regarding the mere efficiency of 1919 sex-hygiene films into changing one’s sexual behaviour. Karl S. Lashley and John B. Watson’s *A Psychological Study of Motion Pictures in Relation to Venereal Disease Campaigns* was commissioned in 1919 and published 1922, after the Thirteen Points had already been adopted.\(^{223}\) Their study makes extremely clear what the established objectives of the first wave of sex hygiene film had been.

\(^{218}\) “*Fit to Win Allowed to Run,*” *Variety* 54, no. 10 (May 2, 1919), 66.

\(^{219}\) The general distribution manager of *The End of the Road* declared: “It is impossible to buy first page advertisements in the newspapers, and now this picture is getting it for nothing. During the first week, our receipts showed a steady increase from day to day. We are doing tremendous business.” “*Attempt to Stop The End of the Road,*” *Exhibitors Herald and Motography* 8, no. 22 (May 24, 1919), 24.

\(^{220}\) Advertisement for *The End of the Road*, *Exhibitors Herald and Motography* 8, no. 25 (June, 14, 1919), 17.

\(^{221}\) “Want a Ban Placed on *The End of the Road,*” *The Moving Picture World* (June 4, 1921), 494.

\(^{222}\) Stacie Colwell, “*The End of the Road*: Gender, the Dissemination of Knowledge, and the American Campaign Against Venereal Disease during World War I,” *Camera Obscura* 10, no. 2, (May 1992), 111.

up to 1919. In their words, they first had “to increase popular knowledge concerning the facts of sexual physiology and psychology with a view to equip the public for better methods of controlling venereal diseases and other sexual ills,” and second “to arouse an emotional attitude in the public which will stimulate real application of the information assimilated, since it is doubtful if any amount of information without accompanying emotional factors will lead to significant changes in behavior.” In relation to the effectiveness of the films, they have concluded that “much space is wasted by the drama,” as “the parts which impressed the audiences most were unconnected with the plot,” and additionally the emotional appeal did not “exceed the expository parts.” Hence, from the perspective of the spectators interrogated by Lashley and Watson, the main problem with the 1919 films was their use of bad storytelling, as opposed to the use of exhibitory moments castigated by critics earlier. The researchers also noted that “the defects of the drama arouse an antagonism toward the entire picture” for the “the more sophisticated groups.” They considered the story “trivial,” while the Medical Group especially displayed a “most antagonistic attitude” against the storyline.

Owing partly to the fact that it was produced for the military, The End of the Road did indeed flaunt a contrasting differently different storyline that the sex-hygiene pictures produced before. The film tells the parallel stories of two women, Mary and Vera, one of whom has benefitted from sexual hygiene instruction from her mother, while the other has not. Firstly, The End of the Road was created as a lesson in venereal diseases for female audiences, depicting two female protagonists for the female spectators to identify with. Secondly, as Colwell points out, it was the first film addressing venereal diseases and not locating the source of the disease in women, but in men. Thirdly, the film depicted venereal disease as being a matter of education and not a matter of class. Created as a motion picture for the military, a setting in which the borders between classes were momentarily dissolved, The End of the Road managed to offer a more impartial perspective upon the spreading of the disease, as opposed to simply reflecting a class doctrine. The manner in which the film ultimately inversed the dominant system of hierarchy, while still inscribing in the landscape of the melodramatic education film, was due to its connection to the war efforts.

224 Ibid., 4.
225 Ibid., 81-82.
226 Ibid., 82.
227 Colwell, 116.
Plot-wise, the film follows Mary and Vera from the early age of seven, through adolescence, and into early adulthood, while pointing out the importance of motherly teachings on matters such as childbirth and intimate relations. While Mary’s mother teaches her the importance of following an education and keeping one’s independence, in a Progressivist support of women’s emancipation, Vera’s mother fails to do so, disallowing sexual education, yet imposing “mercenary standards” for her daughter to marry a wealthy man, instead of the boy she loves. Judging by the decor and suggested by intertitles, both Vera and Mary come from similarly prosperous backgrounds, and interact with equally affluent men. The constant cross-cutting highlights the contrasting decisions the two characters make, guided by the education they received early on. Thus, Mary will refuse all sex and marriage proposals, choosing to graduate and become a nurse, while Vera will contrastingly seek marriage, yet be deceived by a wealthy charlatan who will pass her the venereal disease. Working with Dr. Bell, and interacting with patients as a nurse, Mary learns other people’s stories, as the film constructs a complex web of side narratives, all of them from the perspective of women. All these women belong to different social classes, and have been deceived in similar ways to Vera’s. These are side stories intertwined in a rather complex narrative structure for a sex-hygiene movie.

One of these narrative strands is announced by an intertitle as “a phase of life puzzling to Mary.” While dining in a lavish restaurant, she observes “the champion catch-as-can flirt of his social clique – Russell Elbridge,” a well-off man with venereal disease who seduces and passes the illness forward to young women, despite his wife already being a “chronic invalid” who gave birth to a “poor blind boy.” “If young men could only know what a harvest their wives and children may reap from their sowing of wild oats,” an intertitle reads. Indeed, even his new conquest, the spectator is shown, will go through an unwanted motherhood, and will end on the brink of suicide. At the same time, his wife will endure a surgery led by Dr. Bell and assisted by Mary, denounced in the intertitle as “the operation, which every year, hundreds of thousands of women must undergo because of some man’s criminal folly.” However, the doctor places once more emphasis on education, stating: “The ignorance, prudery, and false standards of our fathers are more to blame than your husband.” This could point out to the fact that, even though the film primarily locates the illness within men, there is an underlying effort to blame inhibition and the lack of education at the core of the disease’s perpetuation, as opposed to solely a certain gender, class, or “tainted” inheritance. This, in turn, was a surprisingly egalitarian view exhibited by a 1919 sex hygiene film whose ultimate purpose was, after all, to regulate women’s sexual behaviour. This is not to say that the typical clinical displays were
absent – the moment most referred to in trade publications is represented by a hospital scene in which Vera is shown the ravages of syphilis on patients by Mary and Dr. Bell, in an attempt to convince her to accept treatment. What ensues is the only expository moment in the film, which occupies a symmetrical position to that in Damaged Goods. Not only is the hallway scene replicated, but if the first sex hygiene casted Richard Bennett in the role of the young man who has contracted syphilis, the last commercial sex hygiene film casted him as the one who holds the cure for the disease, Dr. Bell.\textsuperscript{228} This could have been intentional, it could have been not, but retrospectively it does fit the pattern of a film that has reversed the dominant hierarchies of the previous films. Another reversal, equally gendered, is that all patients are women, which compels an easier identification with the characters – the ones with locomotor ataxia are asked to walk along the hallway, those with skin infections and lacerations reveal their wounds one by one, in front of the camera, in a typical sex hygiene clinical reel, while those with mental deficiency are shown laughing directly into the camera. These fear-inducing, realist grotesque sights are the ones Lashely and Watson have eventually concluded as the most stimulating for the audience, as opposed to the “trivial” story and the lack of cinematic style.\textsuperscript{229} But if they were constituting a means to incite revulsion and fear, they were not creating any longer a Low Other in the lines of gender and social status. It is this that made The End of the Road appropriate for military showings, but not for a theatrical release.

Furthermore, if it is by now rather clear that the story was, in fact, quite unique in the landscape of venereal disease films, there is an additional brief moment in the The End of the Road that can support the film’s individuality. This is the previously mentioned surgery of Mrs. Ellbridge, a scene that has remained completely unnoticed by the publications of the time, yet possesses a level of cinematic artistry otherwise absent from the first wave of sex-hygiene cinema. What’s more, this moment features a new method of inducing anxiety without the sight of the actual surgery or wounds, which is why a slightly closer read can pertain. The surgery scene places the bed underneath an inclined, dark, big, squared window that reflects the whole bed, allowing the spectator to see for a brief moment the opening of the body, without indulging in actual visceral imagery. The film cuts between the visual gimmick, and a low-angle shot framing the doctor’s face, a close-up making him appear augmented and menacing. The camera briefly zooms in, then loses focus, moment in which the viewer realizes it is the point of view of the woman as she falls under anaesthesia. “Clean” from actual improprieties or revulsive

\textsuperscript{228} Eberwein, 31-32.
\textsuperscript{229} Lashley and Watson, 81-82.
moments, this is still a cinematic technique that induces anxiety through the identification with the person being operated, just as the hallway scene induces fear by identifying with the “tainted” character.

Overall, The End of the Road exhibited a greater degree of attention to narrative and cinematic construction, and momentarily dissolved the borders between social strata. It displayed an independent, educated, female character in a medical position of authority, as well as attempted a complex, nuanced narrative, by integrating a multitude of short, interwoven, narrative threads, which sympathized with both the lower-class and the bourgeoisie in regards with the fight against venereal disease. By portraying wealthy male characters as being the closest to bearing the guilt of transmitting venereal disease, the film imposed a counter-view of the everyday social structures presented in earlier films. This addresses back to Stallybrass, White, and Babcock’s “symbolic inversion in art in society” through which the low provoked the “degradation of status.”230 This is the main reason The End of the Road was dismissed – it inverted the everyday hierarchies, structures, rules, and customs of its social formation. Outside of its military setting, The End of the Road could ultimately be understood as a political film promoting a certain class equality, which did not yet resonate with the power structures of the time. As stated by Lashley and Watson, Medical Groups were the most dissatisfied with the storyline, just as the “more sophisticated” audiences.231

A Final Reflection

As the portrayal of the Low Other shifted, so shifted the position of the sex hygiene film within the mainstream industry. Damaged Goods, The Black Stork, and The End of the Road demonstrate the developmental curve of the first wave of sex hygiene films, referred to in the introduction as the creation, fragmentation, and rejection of the hygiene pictures. The dynamics of the sex health film, the evolution from status quo to reversed status quo, were thus simultaneously influenced by a socio-political landscape and a series of aesthetic choices. As the three films created between 1914 and 1919 have been demonstrated to assume a similar hybrid configuration, it was not the reaction to the cinematic techniques alone that had reversed the position of sex hygiene film within the industry, but the manner in which these techniques reflected the dominant social order. Their state as bricolage inherently located them in an

230 Babcock, 29, 32. Stallybrass and White, 4.
231 Lashley and Watson, 81-82.
unstable relationship with classical narrative standards, yet the persisting post-war shift in the portrayal of a social Low Other made them equally problematic. Problematic, that is, for the interconnected institutional powers who created them, as well as for the bourgeois, whose “inherent dominative mode” was being “degraded” by the challenging of the status quo.

Despite being deeply rooted in the stereotypes of its time, *Damaged Goods* represents a milestone within the “prolonged adolescence” of cinema’s representations of sexual desire, as well as a breakthrough for the mere existence of a discourse about sex in the American landscape of the 1910s. Linda Williams wrote that “[i]f screen is to reveal on a screen. But a second, equally important meaning [...] is to shelter or protect with or as a screen. Movies both reveal and conceal.” Indeed, part of a scientific movement towards an improvement of life, the sex hygiene pictures “revealed” a discourse about the effects of sexual desire, yet “concealed” the reasons behind it – the ideological regulation of “breeding,” the institutional control over sex. Embodying most pregnantly the passing of regulatory power over to science, *The Black Stork* witnessed the ascent of medical authorities to widely public and influential ranks, such as the one of cinematic stardom. This, in turn, was as a questionable way of propagating ideological beliefs, positioned in stark contrast with the rigid, unbiased, objective image sought after the representatives of science. The five year span of the commercial sex hygiene movie also reveals how deep the connection with the institutional web of power structures was. The United States Public Health Service, the United States Government, the United States War Department, the Medical Department of the Army, National Hygiene Associations, together with Hollywood studios such as Universal, Famous Players-Lasky, Warner Bros, or publishing tycoon William Randolph Hearst, all positioned themselves, alternately, in the production roles of these films. When a film like *The End of the Road* outlived its duty as sex hygiene war propaganda, the backlash proved so resolute specifically because it came from this interconnected dominant network no more represented by its own product. *The End of the Road* briefly transgressed the dominant hierarchy imposed by its producers, shifting the norms of the sexual regulation this cycle of films was initially created to impose. In retrospective, the film can be understood as a brief forward-facing moment within American sexual history, which proves there are still many facets of early cinema waiting to be revisited within this marginally forgotten division of filmmaking.

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233 Williams, *Screening Sex*, 2.
Working on an under-researched territory also means there are yet no theories and definite statements concerning the first wave of sex hygiene films, just as there are no precise methodologies to follow. Interrogating through the concept of the Low Other has provided the present thesis an insight into the multiple layers surrounding the first wave of hygiene films, as well as offered the possibility of integrating them into a bigger framework of marginal entertainment. By deconstructing the Low Other in the first wave of sex hygiene cinema, this thesis has hopefully demonstrated the importance of forgotten archive material for one’s fair understanding of early cinema, as well as the value of doing such examinations of material. Only by reading into what the system has rejected, may one truly understand the very system.
Conclusion

The aim of the present thesis has thus been to interrogate the period between 1914 and 1919 through the concept of the Low Other, in order to understand the film’s social and political position. More concretely, the thesis has sought to understand which cinematic methods were employed in the construction of the Low Other on-screen, and whether they had any influence on the position of the sex hygiene film within the industry as whole. The result was that the sex hygiene film’s reliance on increasingly objectionable and revulsive imagery ultimately led to a division in opinion in the lines of critics and censors alike. Although different in their treating of the subject, all analysed films shared a comparable level of hybridization, in which various discourses mixed with the scope of manipulating the audience through feelings of pity, anxiety, fear, and revulsion. Therefore, the sex hygiene film engaged most evidently in a combination of narrative and non-narrative material, melodramatic repetitive structures charged with an abundance of grotesque-realist visuals, as well as medical warnings. The replicating of the formula, the use of surrounding medical controversies, and problematic authoritative figures, as well as the abrupt increase in unpleasant displays, caused an accelerating aversion against this cycle of films. What’s more, the mix between questionable aesthetics and a post-war egalitarian approach to class portrayal ultimately brought about the commercial hygiene film’s end.

As far as the scope of the present thesis is concerned, by exhibiting interest in an area of study that deals with both early cinema and films ultimately considered improper for exhibition, this body of text can be inscribed in a wave of recent and ongoing projects that focus on revisiting and offering a second coming to a whole range of motion pictures located outside the classic category of theatrical fiction film. Such contemporary efforts include the Kino Lorber Pioneers project, the Orphan Film Symposium, as well as the anthologies of Accland, Wasson, Orgeron and Streible previously mentioned. Besides offering an insight into the specific inner mechanisms of the sex hygiene film, it is in the intention of the present thesis to exhibit the field of film studies as opening up to researchers from other fields of interest, including those outside the humanities. The discovery and restoration of films such as The Black Stork by Pernick demonstrates the usefulness of bringing together knowledge from various scientific domains. In an image dominated-world, it is the researcher’s purpose to honour the
images belonging now to the archives, and to encourage all scientific fields that could benefit from the inquiry of these forgotten audiovisual materials to do so.

As there are no theories and definite statements about the first wave of sex hygiene film, not only does the present thesis revisit marginally new terrain for scholarship, but anticipates further research. The terrain of non-theatrical film in general, and sex hygiene films in particular, is not only available, but also in need of further investigation. The present thesis has limited itself to interrogating the basic tools employed in the construction of a Low Other within venereal disease pictures. However, once the methods of the construction have been acknowledged, further specific directions can be researched. Hygiene pictures were imagined as a means towards social and sexual regulation, and such their domain extended beyond venereal disease films. More narrow studies on the relationship between the sex hygiene film and notions of gender, race, disability, birth control, abortion, and white slavery can be addressed, important issues which the otherwise limited scope of this paper could not carefully take into account.

In addition, there are many discussions adjacent to the deliberations in the present thesis that can be taken forward as foundations of ambitious research. For instance, it is inferred from the films’ construction that they were specifically made for the middle-class. In contrast, there is actually little to no knowledge over who actually participated to the screenings. Such a study would imply considerable travelling and on-site archival investigations, as no evidence of this kind is known to have been unearthed yet. Such an attempt, however, would help shed light over the validity or fallacy of the assumption.

Furthermore, the screening environment of these pictures would represent another trail of study. Eberwein traces the use of sex education film in classrooms to the second half of the 1940s. Lectures about sex education, however, have been held within cinemas around hygiene pictures since the 1910s, as it has already been pointed out by trade papers. Inasmuch as the regulatory nature of these lectures can be linked to that of the movies, uncovering who participated in this instructions would, once more, be of great interest for scholars addressing notions of class.

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234 Eberwein, 1-2.
235 An article which encouraged exhibitors to invite doctors and hold lectures for the screenings of the “clean” hygiene picture The Scarlet Trail: “If You Run it, Try to Get Support of Social Betterment Crowd,” The Film Daily 11, no. 81 (December, 29 1918), 14.
As a final note, this thesis’s endeavor to deconstruct a series of social discourses manufacturing a Low Other in the American landscape of the 1910s – discourses concerned most directly with the effects and the regulation of sex – might be more pertaining to the current state of politics of the United States than it could have been initially predicted. As it has been demonstrated, there has existed a large historical and political process of maintaining power structures and social hierarchies through the regulation of the nation’s reproductive rights. One hundred years later, however, the American system still faces regulatory abortion laws like those recently passed in Alabama, Georgia, Ohio, Kentucky, and Mississippi, and debated since the first wave of sex hygiene pictures. As there are times when the archives can tell us as much about the present, as they can about the past, research is encouraged. It seems now more important than ever to understand the relationship between a political movement and its regulation of sex.
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