



general public, possibly contributing to the delinquency of the nation's women and children. It was an emerging art form that was not considered any kind of art at the time. That opinion was underlined by a 1915 Supreme Court decision, *Mutual Film Corporation v. Industrial Commission of Ohio*, that ruled First Amendment protections did not apply to motion pictures.

Fronc opens each chapter with a representative movie and the contemporary controversy it engendered, whether over scenes of violent content, racial intermarriage, or "white slavery," i.e., forced prostitution. The introduction, "The Origins of the Anticensorship Movement," begins with a plot summary of *Enlighten Thy Daughter*, a controversial 1917 film which faced calls for censorship for its themes of premarital sex and abortion.

Fronc reveals how reformers targeted not only film content, but the safety of the "nickelodeons" themselves as possibly unsuitable places for women and children to gather, amid concerns of overcrowding and fireproofing, and even worries that celluloid was flammable and thus a possible safety hazard. Yet some reformers approved of the nickelodeons, which in their minds challenged the dominance of the saloons.

Although there was religion-based disapproval of film content, opposition also was driven by Progressive social welfare concerns of the era. Fronc demonstrates that groups like the Women's Christian Temperance Union exercised genuine political power even in the years before women's suffrage, employing what she neatly describes as carrying a "maternalist mandate" (6). Censorship was not always a matter of banning movies; pressure groups like those against animal cruelty would object to specific film scenes, such as the explicit bullfighting portrayals in *Carmen*, which featured the famous actress Theda Bara in the title role (she is also on the front cover of *Monitoring the Movies*).

In 1916 the battle was joined, with the National Board, or "NB," obliged to rebut reports from the General

Federation of Women's Clubs that films contributed to youth delinquency, while promoting its own local branches of the Better Films committees as a voluntary regulatory force. Fronc uses the NB files to flesh out the personality of Louise Connolly, who traveled the South promoting the committees. Connolly was viewed with suspicion as an NB representative: "Virginians remained highly attuned to the perils of regulation from 'carpetbaggers' into the twentieth century . . . [some observers regarded] the NB as nothing more than a tool of the industry" (21).

In the concluding chapter, "Censorship and the Age of Self-Regulation, 1924-1968," Fronc quickly sketches out how McGuire's sudden death in 1923 led to NB's retreat from activism, and how the infamous murder trial of film comedian Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle eventually led to the production guidelines popularly known as the Hays Code. Fronc then skips ahead to a 1965 Supreme Court decision that state censorship boards were a form of unconstitutional prior restraint. Films could no longer be banned by state boards, only rated. Responding in 1968, Jack Valenti of the Motion Picture Association of America devised a voluntary film rating system, a version of which is employed today.

For a book on film, *Monitoring the Movies* is light on images, with 14 small black-and-white photos inserted throughout the text that include only basic identifying captions. The book may have benefited from a more wide-screen overview (to coin a phrase) rather than the tight focus on names and acronyms connected to various pressure groups from the period—especially when fused to a narrative that by necessity jumps around from state to state.

Those caveats aside, Fronc has made a well-researched contribution on a fascinating period of tug-of-war over early films. Film and free-speech historians will find *Monitoring the Movies* a comprehensive analysis of the censorship debate during the Progressive era and would welcome this impressively detailed book on the shelf.

Lust on Trial: Censorship and the Rise of American Obscenity in the Age of Anthony Comstock

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Reviewer _ Christine Schultz-Richert, University of Alabama.

In her work, *Lust on Trial: Censorship and the Rise of American Obscenity in the Age of Anthony Comstock*, author Amy Werbel explores the unintended consequences of the forty-year vice suppression campaign of America's first

professional censor, Anthony Comstock. Equal parts a history of lust in art and a legal history of the cultural importance of the First Amendment, this work offers an inspiring tale of artist-, activist-, and attorney-led revolts against



ensorship, and underlines how the pursuit of moral and sexual control through prosecution is futile in the face of interminable cultural and technological change. Werbel points to the proliferation of lust and freedom of expression as evidence of Comstock's ultimate failure to "purify" the nation of those materials that he deemed obscene. However, the most salient, underlying current of the story of Comstock is not perhaps the question of the efficacy of his mission, but instead the ways in which such efforts disproportionately silence the most vulnerable.

The first two sections outline both the Christian foundation of Comstock's ideology and the creation of the industry and infrastructure of vice suppression in post-Civil War America. Growing up in puritanical Connecticut, Comstock was indoctrinated in the Congregationalist Church, which held that salvation was earned through good deeds. For Comstock, then, the protection of moral purity for fate of the soul and community, Werbel argues, is a godly mission.

In the mid-1800s, Comstock left Connecticut for New York, a land which presented myriad examples of vice on which to wage war. In New York, Comstock joined forces with the YMCA, which was also interested in reducing temptation that might influence young men to turn their backs on Christian principles. Together, Comstock and the YMCA conducted the first organized, methodical campaigns against vice that paved the way to the founding of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice (NYSSV) and the eventual passing of the Comstock Act in 1873, which greatly expanded the list of banned materials and narrowed the burden of proof concerning obscenity.

Parts three, four, and five of the book document the three volumes of Comstock's arrest ledger, spanning the period of vice suppression from 1872 to his death in 1915. Werbel presents a survey of the millions of objects destroyed; from cigar cases with hidden compartments and contraceptives—including their advertisers and providers—to the technological innovations of the early 1900s such as phonographs, kinoscopes, and vitascopes, which featured sexually oriented pictures and audio recordings. The wide breadth of targeted materials illustrates Comstock's frantic attempts to keep up with the changing technology of his time. As the opposition to Comstock's work extends past radical free thinkers and lovers to newspapers, lawyers, and artists, the calibration of the freedom of speech defense further expanded to art, expression, and social causes. Through Comstock's vision of purifying America, the propagation of dissenting art and political

movements ultimately strengthened freedom of speech in America's rapidly changing sociocultural landscape.

Throughout the book, Werbel provides a survey of cultural and technological change as well as witty, pointed commentary to further illustrate Comstock's comical inability to "keep up with the times." Whether it is the cheeky undermining of Comstock's moral high-ground by highlighting his absurd incomprehension of the purpose of the dildo, the inclusion of an endless stream of caricatures and cartoons eroding his credibility, the indifference of law enforcement officials involved in his cases, or the ironic financial gain he and the NYSSV accrued from the exhibition of the scandalous and titillating details of his arrests and trials, Werbel weaves a narrative positioning Comstock as the hopeless antagonist doomed to fail.

However, the virulent underpinning of Comstock's ill-fated journey is the ways in which his actions did in fact silence the voices of the most marginalized, vulnerable communities. Werbel's survey of the thousands of experiences eviscerated by Comstock's relentless pursuit of destruction turns this story from comical irony to a haunting, cautionary tale of the casualties of censorship and self-censorship. Those prosecuted for homosexual acts, for example, received egregiously higher sentences that spanned decades of imprisonment and hard labor. Immigrants, especially later in Comstock's career, were the targets of increased persecution amid isolationist and racist sentiments at the turn of the century. Women who sought to break traditional gender norms or seek personal, sexual freedom were especially condemned by Comstock, who sought to destroy contraceptives, abortifacients, outspoken female activists and writers, gender-bending theatrical performances, and any product that invoked female sexual pleasure. Through these stories, it becomes impossible to ignore the most pernicious impact of the Comstock era: the way Comstockery lives on today, in the otherization of those in the margins or the criminalization of vulnerable populations through statute and institutional power structures.

Werbel's intensely researched and thought-provoking work highlights the many trials and tribulations of both prosecutor and prosecuted, exemplifying the ineffectiveness of censorship and the strength of a nation supported by honesty and freedom of speech rather than any one definition of purity. Through each tantalizing detail of debauchery and obscenity, Werbel presents her very own Comstock-like exhibition of the people, places, and things all targeted by vice suppression, urging readers to look through the peephole at our current culture and its roots—or participation—in censorship.