

Dirty Movies, or: why film scholars should stop worrying about *Citizen Kane* and learn to love bad films

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Volume 7, Issue 2 (November 2010)

Abstract

This article presents an empirical case study of cinema exhibition at a small downtown cinema in an industrial city in the American midwest in the early 1940s. The case study is used to advance an argument that film scholars have too often based their selection of films for study on personal taste, and that film studies has thus evolved around a set of films that does not represent the films which ordinary moviegoers saw and enjoyed. The article argues for the need for film historians to pay greater attention to those films that demonstrably meant something to ordinary cinemagoers in order to produce a more reliable account of the cinema of the past.

Keywords: Cinema, exhibition, audience, taste, canon, sex movies, popularity, moviegoing, film studies.

In a lecture given in 1992, Colin MacCabe—borrowing an evocative phrase from Dante—spoke of the ‘eloquence of the vulgar [1].’ ‘Text and society are not separate categories’ argued MacCabe, ‘but ones which mutually illuminate each other’ [2], implicitly calling for an approach to the analysis of cultural ‘texts’ that pays attention to the most commonplace cultural texts *and* to the social contexts within which such ‘texts’ exist. While there are probably few scholars today working in film and cultural studies who would disagree strongly with this approach, it has more often than not been the case in practice that scholars have been drawn to the exemplary or exceptional in popular culture—auteur cinema, ‘quality’

television, cult movies etc.—leaving the most ‘vulgar’, mundane, everyday cultural forms and contexts relatively unexamined. By way of a case study of cinemagoing and movie exhibition practices in a small Mid-Western city in the early 1940s, this article aims to demonstrate the divergence between the tastes of film scholars and ordinary historical audiences, and show what the analysis of hitherto neglected types of films, and the contexts in which they were consumed, can tell us about cinema and historical movie cultures.

McCabe’s call for attention to be given to both vulgar ‘text’ and context appears unremarkable at first sight but, on closer examination, it is possible to see that it raises some problems when applied to the artefacts of popular culture and their relationships with the social contexts in which they are produced and consumed; the major problem being that of deciding which texts to look at when trying to obtain a reliable historical sense of the society, the culture, the period we are interested in. There have long been film scholars interested in grounded, historical understandings of films and their contexts. More recently, interest in contextualised understandings of films has grown considerably in importance within academic film studies as the seminal work undertaken by Tino Balio, David Bordwell, Kirsten Thompson, Janet Staiger, Gregory Waller, Douglas Gomery and Robert Allen, to name only a few of the pioneers of film history, has been taken up and advanced by Barbara Klinger, Richard Maltby, Melvin Stokes, Kathryn Fuller-Seeley, Mark Jancovich and Mark Glancy among others [3]. However, on the whole, historical and contextual interest in movies has been subordinated to the more dominant approach to academic film study, which is predominantly interested in the film as ‘text’, and has approached the study of movies through various theories of textual meaning and methods of textual analysis, often paying little attention to the larger social and cultural contexts in which those movies existed. Thus constituted, this dominant tendency in academic film studies has been built upon the repression of what Fredric Jameson has called the ‘political unconscious’ of the text, and around a framework that he described as a ‘rewriting’ of the meaning of film texts ‘according to the paradigm of another narrative, which is taken as the former’s master code or Ur-narrative and proposed as the ultimate hidden or unconscious meaning’ of the film in question [4].

The dominance of this approach—itself a legacy of the way that film studies evolved historically from within literary study—has had a profound impact on the study of films. Insofar as this article is concerned, it is the way that emphasis on the film ‘text’ has tended to direct scholars’ attention toward a canon (or, more accurately, canons) of exemplary films that is problematic. In this respect one of the more recent developments in film study—and one that, to its credit, does direct attention toward movies ignored by more mainstream film studies—ultimately proves little better than the mainstream approach to which it sets itself in opposition. The growth of academic interest in what is frequently gathered together under the loosely defined and often misleading term ‘cult’ cinema has been one of the most dynamic

developments in film study in recent years. However, 'cult' is a category that encompasses a broad range of lower grade movies variously alternatively described by scholars as 'paracinema' (Sconce), 'trash' or 'exploitation' cinema (Schaeffer), 'sleaze' (Hawkins) and 'body genres' (Williams).

This attention to hitherto neglected movies is to be welcomed, but this way of grouping together a disparate collection of often quite unrelated movies under the banner 'cult' (or, indeed, any other banner that might be used) appears to be driven more by a drive to legitimize these movies within a canon of their own; one set in opposition to the mainstream film studies canon, perhaps, but ultimately just another canon derived by particular intellectual processes and priorities rather than the historical realities of ordinary moviegoing. This is, then, a very different project from the one embarked upon in this article, which sets out to achieve the very opposite of canonization; to break down the distinction between one canon and another and reinsert the movies thus liberated from canonical captivity into the ordinary, everyday moviegoing culture of American in the 1940s. It is a central contention of this article that the focus on canons (whether mainstream or oppositional) and their component texts produces—or at least amplifies—a disjuncture between text and society by imposing an inorganic separation between equally artificial classes of films, thus circumnavigating the relationship between 'text' and its contexts of consumption, which McCabe rightly suggests is fundamental to the understanding of the 'text'. Put simply, film studies' focus on canonical movies raises an important question: can the 'texts' carefully selected for attention by a sub-group of 'society' that is as unrepresentative of society in general as film scholars undoubtedly are, really 'illuminate' much about society and its culture? *Citizen Kane* (Welles 1941 USA) may well be a preeminent example of the filmmaker's art and it has certainly received its fair share of praise and critical attention from film scholars, all of which might seem to imply that it should be considered a 'significant' film in its time.

But contemporary reports from cinema managers suggest a rather different conclusion, commenting that 'it may be a classic, but it's plumb "nuts" to your show-going public' [5] and that 'we had a good many walkouts and the general consensus of opinion was that it was terrible' [6]. Such reports imply a failure by *Citizen Kane* to capture the imagination of ordinary audiences at the time of its release and thus problematise any suggestion that it should be thought of as particularly emblematic of the cinema of its time [7]. By extension, the same point could be made more generally of film studies' canons of exemplary movies: they are the product of the tastes of an exceptional group (or groups) and, as such, reveal little about the ordinary, everyday dimensions of cinema in the past. If film scholars' tastes can provide little insight into the preferences and practices of ordinary cinemagoers, then, the question arises again: how do we determine which 'texts' will illuminate the society that those cinemagoers inhabited?

To better understand the cinema of the past a turn to some notion of ‘the popular’ seems a logical step. But determining what ‘the popular’ means is not straightforward. At the very least, popularity has both quantitative and qualitative dimensions, as Janet Thumim observes [8]. Some of the more recent movie histories that have attempted to engage with notions of ‘the popular’ employ a ‘top-down’ approach which considers only the quantitative aspect of the popularity of movies, typically using the trade press as a source of movie rental revenues which are employed as a rough-and-ready index of movie popularity [9]. This approach certainly comes closer to objectivity than simply choosing which films to look at, but it introduces other problems, which mainly arise because of the stratified nature of movie production and distribution under the studio system, and the implications that the structure of these industries had for the revenue-earning potential of movies of different classes. Simplifying the intricacies of the movie business for the purpose of illustration, the American movie industry produced three broad classes of feature film: prestige ‘A’ movies destined initially for the larger first-run cinemas; lesser ‘B’ movies which either played as supporting features for ‘A’ movies or headlined in smaller cinemas and, finally, what might be thought of as sub-‘B’ feature films—generally from poverty row and independent producers—which played as supporting features in larger cinemas, and/or provided the main feature film or one half of a double feature in smaller independently owned theatres [10].

The contracts under which films were distributed had different rental terms for different classes of movie. So while ‘A’ and some of the better ‘B’ movies were generally rented on a percentage basis that gave the distributor a cut of the actual admissions receipts taken at the box office, the lower classes of movies usually earned a flat fee for each booking (often a very small amount) [11]. This flat rental rate effectively functioned as a ‘cap’ on the potential earnings of those movies; it determined the maximum a film could earn from any booking regardless how popular it proved to be with the audience. Furthermore, ‘A’ movies played larger, more prestigious cinemas and thus had the potential to attract larger audiences to each show; audiences that were paying higher prices [12]. The net effect of these typical rental practices was the creation of a commercial environment which was structurally biased in favour of the prestige movies. This bias militates against the use of published revenue figures as a simple index of popularity. A high rental revenue figure for a film only tells us that the film earned a large amount of money. It is true that, generally, it will follow that a film which earned high revenues was widely distributed and popular with moviegoers, but what is missing from this picture is any sense of the *qualitative* popularity of the lower classes of films, whose earnings were inevitably smaller than those of prestige movies and which are thus effectively excluded from any quantitative measure of popularity based on revenues, but which nevertheless may have possessed a resonance for contemporary audiences. To gain a better sense of what cinemagoers saw and liked, a more nuanced approach to the appraisal of popularity is required [13].

The case study presented in this article does not purport to resolve all of these difficult issues, but it provides a suggestion of what a more fine-grained method of assessing audience engagement with movies might look like and gives a glimpse at the results that it can achieve. The study looks at movie exhibition in a single small cinema, *The Chief* in Kenosha, Wisconsin in 1941. It is, therefore, a study on an extremely small scale, and no claim is made that the results of this research can be simply extrapolated to larger scales. On the contrary, the argument made here is that larger-scale patterns of cinemagoing would need to be examined with the same attention to detail as this study. This case study outlines a method and an example; it does not provide a simple scalable model.

The primary source of data used in the case study is a set of microfilmed copies of the *Kenosha Evening News* held in the Kenosha Public Library. Cinema advertisements contained in the newspaper list all the films that played each of the city's cinemas, including all of the supporting features. This permits the development of a detailed picture of what films were playing, where and when. The advertisements do not, however, provide any sense of the size of the audience at the *Chief* on any given day. For this reason these data are supplemented with box office data obtained from the collection of film billing sheets contained in the Stanley Warner Collection at the Warner Brothers Archive at the University of Southern California. This collection of film billing sheets is not complete, resulting in some gaps in the financial data. However, where available, these documents provide detailed information about the admissions receipts (box office takings) for individual shows and reveal the rentals due from the exhibitor in respect each movie. Finally, in order to provide a way of classifying the films contained in these datasets in terms that are meaningful within film studies, the American Film Institute film catalogue is used to identify the genre of each movie [14].

Moviegoining at the *Chief* Theatre, Kenosha, Wisconsin, 1941.

The *Chief* was a small cinema in downtown Kenosha, an industrial city situated on the Western shore of Lake Michigan between Chicago and Milwaukee. Kenosha had slightly fewer than 49,000 inhabitants by the early forties [15] and was the home of *Nash Motors* and *Jockey*, the underwear manufacturer, both of which had large factories in the city, which provided the main sources of employment. Established in 1835, Kenosha had grown considerably in population between the turn of the Twentieth Century and the 1930s as large numbers of immigrants to the USA moved to the city to take up residence and employment. Like the nation as a whole, Kenosha suffered economic and social hardship during the Great Depression but, by the city's centenary celebrations in 1935, there were signs of recovery and returning confidence, with the local newspaper asserting that 'Kenosha can look forward to a future of promise' [16]. *Nash Motors'* acquisition of the *Kelvinator* Company in 1938

consolidates the impression of returning economic confidence in Kenosha as the 1930s drew to a close. At the start of the 1940s Kenosha had eight operating cinemas, ranging in size from the 2,300 seat, first run, *Kenosha* theatre at one end of the spectrum, to the *Chief*, a downtown 'fifth run' cinema with 343 seats at the other.

The *Chief* spent several long periods closed to the public in 1941. While it is difficult to know the reasons for these closures, and problematic to speculate, it is possible that these closures tell us something of the difficulties of operating a small cinema on the low box office receipts that were typical [17]. The closures may also have coincided with changes of ownership and efforts by new owners to revamp the image of the theatre: advertisements for the theatre published between its reopening in early October and its closure again in late November clearly indicate that the cinema was part of the Standard Theatre chain during those months. However, advertisements published earlier and later than this give no indication of ownership, suggesting that 1941 saw the transfer of ownership from another chain to Standard, for a brief time, and then again to another unidentified owner; a further sign, perhaps, of the economic challenges that a cinema of this type and size faced.

The cinema was positioned in various different ways throughout the year. Advertisements published in the early part of the year firmly placed the emphasis on value for money as the unique selling point of this cinema, claiming 'downtown's lowest prices' [18]. Between its reopening in early October and its closure in late November, the emphasis in the advertising changed. Advertisements in this period predominantly identify the *Chief* by association with the Standard chain's other cinemas in Kenosha: the Kenosha, Gateway and Vogue cinemas. There is also some evidence of an effort to reinvent the cinema as a family entertainment venue: boasting 'entertainment for the entire family' [19]; styling itself as 'Kenosha's popular family theatre' [20], and offering dinnerware and glassware promotions 'to the ladies' [21]. By early 1942, now no longer advertised together with the other Standard theatres in town, the *Chief* appears to have developed yet another identity, as 'Kenosha's home of "unusual" attractions' [22]. The history of this theatre in this period is thus an incomplete one, full of intriguing gaps, inconsistencies and apparent changes of image. Similarly, the available data concerning the films exhibited at the *Chief* in 1941 is not quite complete, with only partial financial data available. However there is sufficient data to infer a great deal about the character of moviegoing at this theatre in 1941 and of the tastes and preferences of its patrons.

Unsurprisingly the *Chief* didn't screen any of the high-earning first run movies released in 1941. According to the Stanley Warner film billing sheets, the *Chief* was classed as a 5th run cinema, and the majority of the films it ran were either older 'A' movies from the larger Hollywood studios, as they reached the end of their runs, or more recent 'B' movies, as well

as poverty row and independent productions. While the absence of contemporary first run movies at the *Chief* may not, in itself, be particularly remarkable, it is significant for what it implies about the validity of any attempt to assess the popularity of movies generally using rental revenue figures as an index. This economically deterministic approach might provide a reasonable measure of popularity if all moviegoing had taken place at larger downtown movie palaces—or if the distribution of other classes of movie had been much more limited than that of first run films—but, as this case study illustrates, this was not the case.

The stratification of the movie exhibition industry provided potential cinemagoers with a range of different entertainment options, each of which held a different kind of appeal for cinemagoers in a period in which cinemagoing was the most widespread leisure pursuit in America. According to figures cited by Douglas Gomery, in 1945 around 60 percent of the total seating capacity of American cinemas was divided more-or-less equally between the 1,728 largest cinemas (those having an audience capacity of 1200 or more) and the 10,818 smallest (500 seats or fewer), with the remaining 40 percent being in medium sized theatres (500 - 1200 seats) [23]. It is, therefore, not difficult to see that while most of the revenue earned by the industry in any given year was earned in the highest stratum of cinemas (and therefore by the classes of film that played at them on rental terms that required a percentage of the admissions receipts), it does not follow from this purely economic measure of success that the types of films that played in the lower strata of cinemas were significantly less important than the highest earning films in terms of their exposure to, or symbolic resonance for cinemagoers [24].

To put it more simply, the equal distribution of seats between the largest and smallest cinemas provided cinemagoers with equal opportunities to visit either class of cinema and, if anything, the convenient (often very local, 'neighbourhood') locations and lower admission prices of the smaller cinemas suggests that they would have been an important part of people's everyday cinemagoing experience, while visits to the larger, more expensive, cinemas would have been more of a special event. To begin to formulate an understanding of what the 'popular' was in relation to the movies of the past it is, therefore, necessary to develop a picture of historical cinemagoing that incorporates *both* the high revenue earning films playing the downtown picture palaces, *and* those movies that did not earn sufficient revenues to register on this scale but which, nevertheless, comprised the mundane, everyday experience of cinemagoing in the smaller independent theatres [25].

A full list of the titles of films that played the *Chief* in 1941 is contained in the appendix to this article. Examining this list of films it is possible to see that the *Chief* showed a variety of film types, dominated by poverty row westerns. For the most part, the theatre's attraction for the moviegoing public seems to have been premised on its relatively low admission prices of 10c

to 15c, rather than the intrinsic appeal of any specific film [26]. Detailed breakdowns of the films that played at the *Chief* in 1941 by genre and by distributor appear as Figs. 1 and 2 respectively.

Fig. 1 - Number of movies shown, by genre [27]

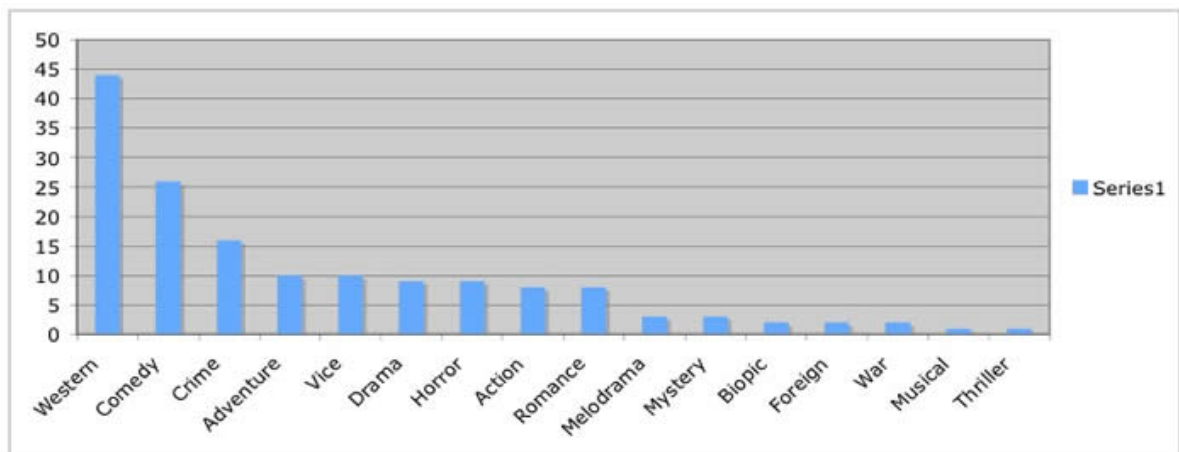
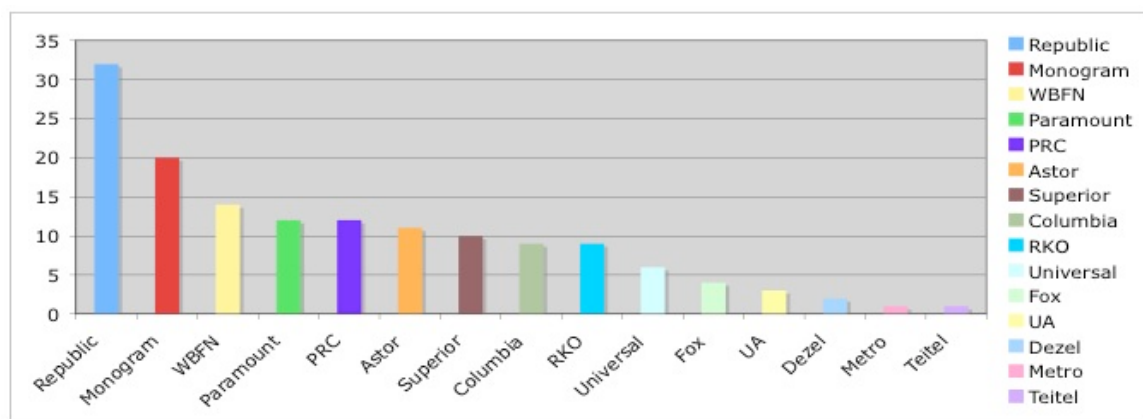


Fig. 2 - Number of movies shown, by distributor



At first sight there seems nothing very unusual about the characteristics of the films that played the *Chief* in 1941; certainly nothing that suggests a need to revise long-held—if largely

anecdotal—understandings about moviegoing at smaller theatres in the 1940s. Dominated by films from the poverty row studios, and particularly by westerns, there is nothing obvious in these analyses that suggests that cinemagoers in 1941 visited the *Chief* for any reason other than the fact that it had a convenient downtown location, was cheap to visit, and showed the kinds of movies that audiences generally liked, even if particular films didn't generate much intrinsic interest. However, closer examination of the data reveals that this typical pattern of exhibition was punctuated throughout the year by a series of noteworthy departures from the norm.

The first of these occurred in early April, when the *Chief* played *Gambling with Souls* (Clifton 1936 USA) supported by *Born to Be Wild* (Kane 1938 USA). The main feature was what was known at the time as a 'sex film'—in essence, titillation masquerading as education: a cautionary tale in which a respectable housewife is forced into prostitution after incurring substantial gambling debts in rigged games of chance [28]. It was an old film even in 1941, and a viewing of the film reveals little obvious aesthetic charm [29]. It is a cheaply-made film, amateurishly acted and with low production values [30]. Yet, aided by a high-profile, sensationalistic promotional strategy typified by the newspaper advertisement that appears at Fig. 3, the *Chief* was able to play this movie at premium admission prices of 20c. The movie was so successful that the original three day midweek run [31] was extended a further two days to include Friday and Saturday. *Gambling with Souls* earned the *Chief* its highest revenues for 1941; \$715 for five days: not a large sum in absolute terms but relatively large compared to the norms for this cinema. Indeed, the five-day run of *Gambling With Souls* earned only slightly less than the theatre's cumulative box office receipts for the 20 day period that followed it. This 'Adults Only' show was, therefore, a disproportionate success for the *Chief*, and it provided a formula that the theatre would repeat on several further occasions throughout the year in an effort to reproduce this success.

The next 'Adults Only' engagement came in late April: *Sinful Souls* [32], playing with *The Wrong Road* (Cruze 1937 USA). Publicity for this show promised viewers a glimpse of 'Jazz Mad Youth on the Road to Ruin' [33], in a main feature in which 'nice girls become vice girls [34]. The promotional campaign for *Sinful Souls* was similar to that successfully used to promote *Gambling with Souls*, involving larger-than-usual advertisements in the local newspaper a few days before the start of the run. These advertisements foregrounded sexualised images of women and sensationalistic taglines, emphasizing what were evidently perceived as the film's main selling points. The admission policy was the same too: premium prices (20c) and adults only. These tactics appear to have worked, as the original three-day, Tuesday to Thursday run was once again extended by a further two days, to include Friday and Saturday [35].

Fig. 3.



The *Chief's* next 'Adults Only' offering would demonstrate that the promise of sex and scandal could not always guarantee audience appeal. Despite an increased promotional effort, *Damaged Goods* (Stone 1937 USA) [36] (playing with *Notorious But Nice* - Thorpe 1933 USA) only managed its planned three day run, earning a total of \$151.60 [37]. These were

better than average earnings for a midweek show at this cinema, but nowhere near the exceptional revenues achieved by *Gambling with Souls* and apparently not sufficient to justify holding this film over for additional days. The next sex film to play at the *Chief*—*The Virgin Bride* [38], a sex comedy, playing with *School for Husbands* (Marton 1937 UK), a 'gay spicy bedroom farce'—was apparently more to the taste of the audience and proved popular enough to have its midweek run extended into the weekend [39].

The *Chief* ran two further shows having 'sex films' as main features before it closed down temporarily, on 11th July 1941. The main feature in the first of these shows, *Smashing the Vice Trust* (Melville 1937 USA), was based on the case of Lucky Luciano, and involved schoolgirls forced into prostitution. This was supported by *Private Detective* (Smith 1939 USA). The second of these shows offered the novelty of an 'Adults Only' double bill, with *Secrets of a Model* (Newfield 1940 USA) as the main feature and *High School Girl* (Wilbur 1934 USA) playing support. Neither show had its run extended for additional days. In the case of the latter show, this is noteworthy, since this engagement earned admissions receipts of \$200.80 for its 3 day run, significantly more than the norm. It is likely that a holdover was impossible because the closure of the theatre on 11th July—the day after that run ended—had been planned for some time.

When the *Chief* reopened in October there is some evidence of an attempt to upgrade the theatre's image and reposition it as a venue suitable for families. Some of the newspaper advertisements for the theatre at this time placed the emphasis on the provision of family entertainment, while others worked to create an association with domesticity and femininity through dinnerware and glassware promotions, advertised explicitly 'to the ladies'. These efforts were short lived, however, and it was not long before sex movies returned to the *Chief*. *Girls Under 21* (Nosseck 1940 USA) played the cinema in late November 1941, supported by an action film, *Danger Ahead* (Staub 1940 USA). The admissions receipts were low, however; only \$59.90 over the three days, perhaps because the main feature had already played a support engagement at the nearby Roosevelt Cinema in October. This was the last engagement of 'sex films' to play the *Chief* in 1941. The cinema closed again in late November and remained closed until New Year's eve.

With its downtown location, just off main street and within easy walking distance of two of the biggest sources of employment in the city, it seems likely that the relative popularity of these 'sex films'—as against the less risqué, everyday fare of westerns and comedies offered by the *Chief*—was due at least in part to the existence of a masculine subculture of cinemagoers who frequented this theatre when it showed these films: factory workers who exchanged word-of-mouth recommendations with co-workers about films that provided a desired degree of sexual interest [40]. If this sort of word-of-mouth culture played any significant part in the

popularity of the 'sex films' shown at the *Chief* in 1941, then events that occurred between the November closure and late December reopening would signal an end to this culture. The attack on Pearl Harbor on 7 December 1941 would result in the mobilization of enormous numbers of American men into military service and produce a concomitant influx of women into traditionally male domains of industrial work, thus changing the sexual composition of the workforce in these factories and dissipating the masculine culture that cultivated and reproduced a taste for these sex films.

An overall view of the roster of films that played the *Chief* in 1941 produces a rather muddled picture. On the one hand most of the films that played there were unexceptional—recent poverty row productions and some older 'A' and 'B' films from the major studios. On the other hand there is clear evidence that certain types of films—the sex movies discussed in this paper—were *popular* with audiences at the *Chief*; that audiences went specifically to see these films, rather than just to go to the cinema. Generalizing from these two divergent trends is difficult. It is neither possible to claim that this type of small theatre fitted into the cinemagoing culture solely by providing inexpensive opportunities for moviegoers to simply go to the cinema, nor that the *Chief* cultivated a distinct identity for itself as a place where particular types of film were available; it wasn't a 'grindhouse' theatre. The record of film exhibition at the *Chief* in 1941 seems to lack the homogeneity necessary to reach any general conclusions.

This examination of grass roots movie culture fails to produce a tidy homogenous account of the mundane, everyday realities of cinemagoing in the early forties, and certainly not a model that could be simply extended in order to account for wider contexts. While this is certainly inconvenient from any perspective that yearns for homogeneity and scalability, I argue that within these limitations lie the greatest strengths of this case study: it is precisely the absence of homogeneity that enables us finally to recognize the messy realities of film history, which have too often been obscured by film studies' theory-derived blind spots and its tidy, artificial canons.

Rather than rejecting a conclusion that fails to neatly tie up all loose ends in a quest for a rather artificial coherence, then, we can usefully take a pointer from mathematics. Critiquing the limitations of Euclidian geometry in *The Fractal Geometry of Nature*, Benoit Mandelbrot encapsulated in a few words the inability of a mathematical science built around the description of regular forms to account for the complexity of the forms that are actually encountered in nature: 'clouds are not spheres, mountains are not cones, coastlines are not circles and bark is not smooth'[\[41\]](#). This is a useful heuristic for thinking about cinema: a similar point can be made about the historical realities of moviegoing and cinema cultures, and of the tools that film studies has developed thus far in order to try to understand the

aggregation of forms, institutions and practices that constituted the complicated historical realities of moviegoing in the past.

This article started with a fairly simple proposition. Film texts and the various contexts within which those texts exist (the industrial contexts of production; the social contexts of reception) are inextricably intertwined: it is impossible to understand one without considering the other. From that starting point, the article has tried to work around some of the difficult problems that attend this socio-historical approach to film and to illustrate a method that begins to restore a sense of the complexity of film and its contexts of consumption. This is an area in which reception theorists have, in recent years, made considerable inroads into the predominantly 'text'-based approach to the movies that dominated earlier approaches to film study. Nevertheless, such valuable works are still outnumbered by theory (and taste) driven textual analyses of the exceptional or exemplary in film, and this remains an area in which further work is required in order to avoid an unintended misrepresentation of movie/cultural history by failing to consider the movies that actually mattered to real audiences.

Wheeler Winston Dixon's relatively recent anthology of work on the American Cinema of the 1940s—surely an paradigmatic instance of the impulse to bring 'text' and 'society' together, and one that is sufficiently recent to be in a position to take on board the insights of reception study over the years preceding its publication—exemplifies the degree to which this remains a problem today [42]. Notwithstanding the opportunities now available to engage in a more nuanced history of the period, the emphasis of the anthology is resolutely on the best-known 'A' movies of the time. Neither 'poverty row' nor 'state's rights distributors' receive entries in the index, and within the few pages in this volume that make any mention of the companies whose movies dominated the program at the *Chief* in 1941—Monogram, Republic and PRC—the book's emphasis is firmly on the role that these producers played in providing supporting features for the big movies of the day; acknowledging that there was a 'hunger for product in theatres of the 1940s' [43], which outstripped the production capacity of the major studios and provided a niche in the market for minor producers, but oversimplifying the role of the minors as simply 'attend[ing] to the lower half of the double bill' [44], thereby eliminating from consideration a whole stratum of cinemagoing that was central to the everyday experience of the movies in the 1940s.

It would be unfair to criticize Dixon too harshly for this gap in his history of 1940s cinema. He does at least acknowledge that 'I have, necessarily, for reasons of space, ignored a great deal' including 'the many Republic westerns and serials... the low-budget Producers Releasing Corporation (PRC) westerns' and 'horror films, such as Monogram's...' [45]. But perhaps now it is time for studies of these ignored low-grade movies to now enter more

positively the film studies mainstream. The ‘vulgar’ may be eloquent, but we will never know what it has to say unless it is afforded an opportunity to ‘speak’.

There are compelling reasons why such a development is now of pressing importance. Many of the films that played in the *Chief* and, no doubt, in thousands of small cinemas across the USA—films that, as this study shows, did mean *something* to 1940s audiences—are disappearing fast. Several of the movies that played the *Chief* in 1941 are difficult to identify at all. Few of the movies that played the theatre are available on DVD or video, and the availability of prints that could be studied is uncertain. There is a real danger, then, that if these films are not recuperated for academic study—and soon—they will disappear forever; remaining only as the distant memories of a rapidly disappearing generation; as no more than titles on decaying film billing sheets or newspaper advertisements in the archive. While valuable in their own right, such documentary forms can provide only the thinnest traces of the films that held real significance for past audiences; traces that can tell us little about those films themselves or the reasons why they might have been popular with, or significant to those audiences. Once these films disappear, this process will be irreversible, and film study will be poorer for their loss.

Appendix - List of Films

A Chump at Oxford UA 1940
Adventures of Tarzan Republic 1935
Amori Sulle Alpi
Argentine Nights Universal 1940
Army Girl Republic 1938
Bad Man of Deadwood Republic 1941
Beware Spooks! Columbia 1939
Big House for Girls Astor 1932
Billy the Kid Outlawed PRC 1940
Border Legion Republic 1940
Born to be Wild Republic 1938
Boss of Bullion City Universal 1940
Carolina Moon Republic 1940
Carson City Kid Republic 1940
Cat and the Canary Paramount 1939
Caught in the Act PRC 1941

Colorado Republic 1940
Come on Leathernecks Republic 1938
Covered Wagon Days Republic 1940
Damaged Goods 1937 Dezel
Dance Girl Dance RKO 1940
Danger Ahead Monogram 1940
Danger Flight Monogram 1939
Dangerous Lady PRC 1941
Death Rides the Range Superior 1939
Desert Bandit Republic 1941
Doomed to Die Monogram 1940
Dreaming Out Loud RKO 1940
Drums Along the Mohawk Fox 1939
Drums of the Desert Monogram 1940
Emergency Landing PRC 1941
Federal Fugitives PRC 1941
Flying Deuces RKO 1939
Footsteps in the Dark WBFN 1941
Forty Thousand Horsemen
and a "Girl" Teitel 1941
Frontier Crusader PRC 1940
Fugitive From Justice WBFN 1940
Gambling Daughters PRC 1941
Gambling on the High Seas WBFN 1940
Gambling With Souls Superior 1936
Gangs of Chicago Republic 1940
Girl From Havana Republic 1940
Girls of the Road Columbia 1940
Girls Under 21 Columbia 1940
Great Train Robbery Republic 1941
Haunted Honeymoon Metro 1940
Hell's Angels Astor 1930
Heritage of the Desert Paramount 1939
Hidden Gold Paramount 1940
High School Girl Astor 1934
High Sierra WBFN 1941
Hit Parade of 1941 Republic 1940
I Want a Divorce Paramount 1940
I'm Still Alive RKO 1940

In Name Only RKO 1939
Jesse James Fox 1939
King of the Lumberjacks WBFN 1940
King of the Newsboys Republic 1938
Kit Carson UA 1940
Kitty Foyle RKO 1940
Knights of the Range Paramount 1940
Law and Order Universal 1940
Law of the Pampas Paramount 1939
Law of the Wolf Superior 1939
Legion of the Lawless RKO 1940
Light of Western Stars Paramount 1940
Lone Wolf Meets a Lady Columbia 1940
Marked Men PRC 1940
Melody and Moonlight Republic 1940
Men Against the Sky RKO 1940
Midnight Limited Monogram 1940
Military Academy Columbia 1940
Murder in the Air WBFN 1940
Murder on the Yukon Monogram 1940
Mutiny on the Elsinore 1937
Mystery Plane Monogram 1939
Notorious But Nice Astor 1933
Oklahoma Renegades Republic 1940
Only Angels Have Wings Columbia 1939
Outside the 3 Mile Limit Columbia 1940
Panama Patrol Superior 1939
Paper Bullets PRC 1941
Penny Serenade Columbia 1941
Phantom of Chinatown Monogram 1940
Pony Post Universal 1940
Pride of the Bowery Monogram 1940
Private Detective WBFN 1939
Ragtime Cowboy Joe Universal 1940
Rain Astor 1932
Rancho Grande Republic 1940
Robin Hood of the Pecos Republic 1941
Rookies on Parade Republic 1941
Rustler's Valley Paramount 1937

Saga of Death Valley Republic 1939
Santa Fe Marshall Paramount 1940
Santa Fe Trail WBFN 1940
Savage Gold Superior 1933
Scarface Astor 1932
Scatterbrain Republic 1940
School for Hubands 1937
Secret Evidence PRC 1941
Secret Valley Superior 1937
Secrets of a Model Dezel 1940
Shadows Over Shanghai Superior 1938
Shenandoah Valley
Showdown Paramount
Sinful Souls
Sis Hopkins Republic 1941
Sky Bandits Monogram 1940
Sky Devils Astor 1932
Smashing the Money Ring WBFN 1939
Smashing the Vice Trust 1937
Soldier and the Lady RKO 1937
Something to Sing About Superior 1937
Son of the Navy Monogram 1940
South of Panama PRC 1941
South of the Border Republic 1939
Stagecoach War Paramount 1940
Stagecoach War Paramount 1940
Strawberry Blonde WBFN 1941
Streamline Express Astor 1935
Submarine Patrol Fox 1938
Swanee River Fox 1939
Tear Gas Squad WBFN 1940
That Gang of Mine Monogram 1940
The Bat Whispers Astor 1930
The Crime of Dr Crespie Republic 1935
The Crouching Beast Superior 1935
The Devil Bat PRC 1940
The Human Monster Monogram 1940
The Letter WBFN 1940
The Lion Has Wings UA 1939

The Monster Walks Astor 1932
The Phantom Strikes Monogram 1938
The Sea Hawk WBFN 1940
The Sea Wolf WBFN 1941
The Virgin Bride
The Wrong Road Republic 1937
Three Faces West Republic 1940
Tomboy Monogram 1940
Torpedo Raider Monogram 1935
Tough Kid Monogram 1938
Trail of the Silver Spurs Monogram 1941
Two Fisted Rangers Columbia 1939
Una Donna Fra Due Mondi 1936
Under Texas Skies Republic 1940
Undercover Agent Monogram 1939
Vampire Bat Astor 1933
Wallaby Jim of the Islands Superior 1937
Winners of the West Universal 1940
Wyoming Outlaw Republic 1939
Young Bill Hickock Republic 1940
Young Buffalo Bill Republic 1940
Yukon Flight Monogram 1940

Notes

[1] Published in Colin MacCabe. *The Eloquence of the Vulgar: Language, Cinema and the Politics of Culture*. (London: BFI Publishing, 1999), 147-162.

[2] Ibid.

[3] See, for example, Balio, T. *The American Film Industry*. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985); Balio, T. *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930-1939*. (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1995); Bordwell, D., Staiger, J. and Thompson, K. *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1988); Thompson, K. and Bordwell, D. *Film History: An Introduction* 3rd Edn. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2009); Staiger, J. *Interpreting Films: Studies in the Historical Reception of American Cinema*. (Princeton: Princeton

University Press, 1992); Staiger, J. *Perverse Spectators: The Practices of Film Reception*. (New York: New York University Press, 2000); Waller, G. Ed. *Moviegoing in America: A Sourcebook in the History of Film Exhibition*. (Malden MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 2002); Waller G. and Musser, C. Eds *Main Street Amusements: Movies and Commercial Entertainment in a Southern City, 1896-1930*. (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995); Gomery, D. *Shared Pleasures: A History of Movie Presentation in the United States*. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992); Gomery, D. *The Hollywood Studio System: A History*. (London: BFI Publishing, 2005); Allen, R. and Gomery, D. *Film History: Theory and Practice*. (New York and London: McGraw Hill, 1985); Klinger, B. *Melodrama and Meaning: History, Culture, and the Films of Douglas Sirk*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); Klinger, B. *Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies, and the Home*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006); Maltby, R. and Craven, I. *Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995); Stokes, M. and Maltby, R. *American Movie Audiences: From the Turn of the Century to the Early Sound Era*. (London, BFI Publishing, 1999); Maltby, R., Stokes, M. and Allen, R. *Going to the Movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of Cinema*. (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007); Fuller K. H. *At The Picture Show: Small Town Audiences and the Creation of Movie Fan Culture*. (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996); Fuller-Seeley, K. H. Ed. *Hollywood in the Neighborhood: Historical Case Studies of Local Moviegoing*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2008); Jancovich, M., Faire, L. and Stubbings, S. *The Place of the Audience: Cultural Geographies of Film Consumption*. (London: BFI Publishing, 2003) and Chapman, J., Glancy, M. and Harper, S. *The New Film History: Sources, Methods, Approaches*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007).

[4] Jameson, F. *The Political Unconscious*. (New York, London: Routledge, 2009), 6.

[5] Anon., 'What the Picture Did For Me', *Motion Picture Herald*, Vol. 146 No. 1, (3 January 1942), 46.

[6] Anon., 'What the Picture Did For Me', *Motion Picture Herald*, Vol. 145 No. 12, (20 December 1941), 66.

[7] At this point it is only fair to note also Kathryn Fuller-Seeley's observation that reports in 'What the Picture Did For Me' were not necessarily particularly representative of those of the general public either. Fuller-Seeley, K. "'What the Picture Did For Me": Small Town Exhibitors' Strategies for Surviving the Great Depression' in Fuller-Seeley, K. (2008).

[8] Thumim, J. *Celluloid Sisters: Women and Popular Cinema*. (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1992)

[9] Figures published in *Variety* and the *Motion Picture Herald* are typical sources of data for this approach to the measurement of popularity. See, for example, Chopra-Gant, M. *Hollywood Genres and Postwar America: Masculinity, Family and Nation in Popular Movies and Film Noir*. (London: I B Tauris, 2005).

[10] This is an over-simplification and, particularly, omits a variety of 'short subjects', newsreels, cartoons and other material that supported feature films. It is, however, a sufficient account for the purposes of this article and, if anything, the existence of such an array of other material strengthens my argument for the need to examine closely the composition of cinema programs instead of focusing on the major feature films alone.

[11] The percentage rate for movies in the former category was variable, depending on the particular terms of each rental contract.

[12] Audiences which, incidentally, likely also saw lesser movies as supporting features in these shows.

[13] What cinemagoers liked might not always have been films. Live performances, bingo and promotions for consumer goods like dinnerware and books were often part of the cinemagoing experience. The possibility that cinemagoing in itself was a greater attraction for audiences than any particular film represents one of text-based film studies' great blind spots. For a fuller account of these other pleasures of cinemagoing see Glancy, M. and Sedgwick, J. "Cinemagoing in the United States in the Mid-1930s: A Study Based on the *Variety* Dataset" in Maltby, R., Stokes, M. and Allen, R. C. *Going to the Movies: Hollywood and the Social Experience of Cinema*. (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2007).

[14] Not all the films in the dataset are listed in the AFI Catalog and in some cases the Internet Movie Database is used as an alternative. In the few cases where neither database has a listing for a film, genre is implied from the advertisement in the *Kenosha Evening News*.

[15] *Wright's Kenosha City Directory*. (Milwaukee: Wright Directory Company, 1941), 13.

[16] 'Kenosha's First Century' *Kenosha Evening News* 15 June 1935, 5.

[17] On the other hand it is worth noting that the entry for the cinema on the cinematreasures.org website describes it as having a 'checkered on-again-off-again history', so perhaps the difficulties were particular to this cinema.

www.cinematreasures.org/theatre/14572, accessed 12 October 2010.

[18] See, for example, advertisement for Chief theatre *Kenosha Evening News* 27 March 1941, 13.

[19] Advertisement for Chief theatre, *Kenosha Evening News* 10 October 1941, 13.

[20] Advertisement for Chief theatre, *Kenosha Evening News* 8 November 1941, 9.

[21] Advertisement for Chief theatre, *Kenosha Evening News* 9 November 1941, 10.

[22] Advertisement for Chief theatre, *Kenosha Evening News* 24 January 1942, 9.

[23] Gomery, D. *The Hollywood Studio System*. (London: BFI Publishing, 1986), 13.

[24] As Kevin Heffernan notes, 'the lucrative first-run theaters ... comprised only 15 percent of the total theaters in operation but garnered 70 percent of the nation's box office receipts'.

Heffernan, K. *Ghouls, Gimmicks and Gold: Horror Films and the American Movie Business 1953-1968* (Durham NC and London: Duke University Press, 2004), 2.

[25] It is perhaps worth emphasising here that small cinemas such as the *Chief* did play 'A' movies, but only late in their runs, often several years after release.

[26] This is certainly consistent with one of the findings of Handel; that almost half of the audience in his study was 'nonselective', going to the movies to see 'any picture' rather than a particular film. Handel, L. A. *Hollywood Looks at its Audience*. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1950), 152-153.

[27] This is an area where this study could undoubtedly be improved by more sophisticated methods. Genre classifications in this article have been taken mostly from the American Film Institute listings for the films. The AFC catalogue lists genres individually so that if a movie is a 'musical comedy' it is listed as both a musical and a comedy but not as a 'musical comedy', which is not, therefore, recognised as a distinct genre in itself. For the purpose of this study it has been difficult to determine how to deal with such cases since it is not always readily apparent what weighting to give to the different components of the generic hybrid: should

'musical' and 'comedy' be given equal weighting where both appear in the catalogue listing, or is the film in question really a musical with a few gags or a comedy with a couple of songs? The compromise adopted has been to simply treat the film as whichever genre the AFC catalogue lists first. This accounts for the surprisingly low number of musicals in this table (most of the films are listed as comedies first). A more sophisticated method of analysis employing a system of weighting generic components for hybrid films would probably change the picture slightly from the one presented in this table.

[28] Reviewing the film under its alternate title, 'Vice Racket', *Variety* (19 May 1937), 23 classed the film as a 'sex piece,'. *Film Daily* (29 April 1937), 4 called it a 'sex film' in an article on the banning of such movies in Council Bluffs, Iowa and neighbouring city, Omaha, Nebraska. Films of this type were also often referred to as 'vice movies'.

[29] Unlike many of the films discussed in this article, *Gambling With Souls* has been released on DVD.

[30] *Variety* (19 May 1937), 23 judged the lead actress's performance thus: 'Her drama is atrocious, and her emotional display amusingly hammy.'

[31] The *Chief* typically had three runs each week, a midweek, three-day run on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday and two 'weekend' runs of two days each: Friday/Saturday and Sunday/Monday.

[32] It has so far proven impossible to identify this movie. Neither the AFI Film Catalogue nor the IMDB has a reference to it under any title. The only reference to the movie found thus far is in *Boxoffice* (26 January 1946), 68 which reports that the movie had been rejected by the Chicago censors in 1945, and links the movie to the distributor, Dezel. 1941 Film Billing Sheets for this distributor—in the Warner Brothers Archive—make no reference to this film, however. Possibly it was being distributed by a different company in 1941.

[33] Advertisement for Chief theatre, *Kenosha Evening News* 25 April 1941, 14.

[34] Advertisement for Chief theatre, *Kenosha Evening News* 28 April 1941, 12.

[35] No revenue figures are available for this engagement.

[36] Also released under the title *Marriage Forbidden*.

[37] If, as seems likely, word-of-mouth publicity played any part in the success of the two earlier adults only shows then it is quite possible that the midnight preview of *Damaged Goods* would have been counter-productive. Unlike *Gambling With Souls*, *Damaged Goods* contains no explicit scenes, and the fact that it is essentially a morality tale about the risks of contracting venereal disease from casual sexual encounters likely meant that it would have a limited appeal to audiences seeking sex and scandal.

[38] *Mademoiselle Ma Mere* (1936 Decoin France)

[39] No box office revenue figures are available.

[40] The existence of such a culture would explain the relative lack of popularity of *Damaged Goods*; a film which—on the face of its publicity—promised similar pleasures to sex films that succeeded in attracting a larger audience.

[41] Benoit Mandelbrot. *The Fractal Geometry of Nature*. (San Francisco: Freeman, 1983), 1.

[42] Dixon, W. W. ed. *American Cinema of the 1940s: Themes and Variations*. (Oxford: Berg, 2006).

[43] *Ibid*, 15.

[44] *Ibid*, 16.

[45] *Ibid*, 180-181.

Acknowledgements

The research presented in this essay was made possible by a grant from the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council (project grant number: 119137).

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