

Introduction: Screening Diseases. Films on Sex Hygiene in Germany and France in the First Half of the 20th Century

Christian Bonah, Anja Laukötter

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French hygienist André Cavaillon, chief of the Central Service of Prophylactics at the Ministry of Public Hygiene, was among the viewers when the lights went off at a Paris screening of *Il était une fois trois amis* (1929 FR), a VD prevention film. The official was astonished that a Boulevard Cinema would promote this educational film against venereal disease in the same way it would promote an American comic or a “yellow film”.¹ Cavaillon thought that the best way of finding out how many people attended the film and what their reactions were was to go see it himself. After the screening he wrote: “We saw an enormous crowd was entering and shortly afterwards the projection began in a theatre packed with an audience that followed the film religiously for an hour by the clock.”² This introductory scene testifies to the unprecedented development of public health education films after the First World War, a development that has become a rich topic of study for historians over the past two decades.³

1 “Yellow film” refers here to lurid features and sensationalized news. The expression “film jaune” is used by Cavaillon to characterize exploitation film in popular, lower-class movie theatres. Cavaillon 1931, 789–795.

2 Cavaillon 1931, 789–795. For the French version: “Le cinéma et la propagande éducative contre le péril vénérien”, *Revue internationale du cinéma éducateur*, 1931, 146–151.

3 Lefebvre 1996; Pernick 1996; Boon 1999; Lefebvre 2004; Ostherr 2005; Reagan/Tomes/Treichler 2007; Cantor/Bonah/Laukötter (forthcoming).

After World War I, directions pursued by hygiene cinema varied and diverged. It is the goal of the following contributions to investigate similarities and differences of sex hygiene films in continental Europe from their beginnings in World War I to their significant transformation after World War II. Throughout the interwar period, educational films on venereal diseases were often used as resources for sexual education.

According to our present knowledge, the first series of sex hygiene films were released in the United States during World War I. They were conceived of as a progressive way of grappling with the ills of modern urban and industrial society, even if today such films are often considered to be “ethically dubious, industrially marginal and aesthetically bankrupt”.⁴ The films in question deal with topics such as eugenics, birth control, illegitimacy, prostitution and venereal disease. Between 1914 and 1919, sex hygiene films belonged to the thriving genre of health education cinema, considered by officials and the general public to be respectable films with good intentions, yet often tainted with nationalist and eugenic undertones.⁵ Five years later they were subject to widespread censorship, scolded for the unpleasant spectacle they presented along with their awkward relationship to dominant cinematic practices in the United States. The public release of a series of VD prevention films produced by the American Armed Forces’ Commission on Training Camp Activities (CTCA)⁶ also triggered the adoption of a self-regulatory code by a conference of top motion picture directors in 1921.⁷ While Hollywood was upgrading its public image as the world’s leading manufacturer of entertainment, restrictions on exploiting interest in sex in an improper or suggestive manner, white slavery, nudity, illicit love and vice and other “unnatural practices dangerous to social morality” led to the separation of respectable movie entertainment in the US from what has become known as exploitation film, a division that lasted for half a century.⁸

4 Schaefer 1999, 17.

5 Pernick 1996.

6 Created in 1917, the CTCA produced *Fit to Fight* (1918, US), *Fit to Win* (1919, US), and *The End of the Road* (1919, US) in the framework of its program on “educational prophylaxis”. After initial special audience screenings in the army, the three films hit the public screen in rapid succession with five other new sex hygiene films in 1919. These included *The Spreading Evil* (1918, US) by James Keane and *Scarlet Trail* (1919, US). Ironically, it was the state-supported sex hygiene films that triggered censorship initiatives. Schaefer, 1999, 24–27.

7 The code came to be known as the Hayes Code. Annette Kuhn has described a more heterogeneous and multi-institutional approach to sexual hygiene film censorship in Great Britain. See: Kuhn 1988.

8 Schaefer 1999; Eberwein 1999.