

“A word from man to man”. Interwar Venereal Disease Education Films for Military Audiences in France

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Summary

In the 1910s, in the wake of the glorious decade of syphilography (1900–1910), the early health education films lay the groundwork for a pragmatic approach to the containment of venereal diseases combining (early) diagnosis, treatment and prophylaxis. Realizing that WWI was turning into a durable military conflict, the French Army created a Cinematographic Section (SCA) in 1915 for the purposes of war propaganda and documentation. In 1916, secretary of war Justin Godard declared syphilis a “national public danger” and initiated information campaigns in military and civilian spheres. Conferences accompanied with film screenings were organized for all new military recruits, resulting in the production of a series sex hygiene films for military audiences characterized by a short, evocative and precise documentary style, contrasting with the romantic sex hygiene films aimed at the general public. This contribution examines the cinematographic origins of the instructional films for the military, as well as their evolution up to WWII

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and their influence on public sex hygiene films for civilians in the interwar period in France.

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When Lucien Viborel, a leading French specialist of health education, published a 700 page handbook on *Modern techniques of social hygiene propaganda* in 1930, he included a section on what health education should and should not be, in which he stated that “films, as all means of education, should be clear and minutely adapted to their environment”.¹ Viborel defined social hygiene propaganda as “the art of propagating, disseminating, vulgarizing and spreading, in one word of popularizing an idea utilizing factual knowledge”.² In a section on doctrines, tools and texts for sanitary defence, his handbook proposed a list of special audiences to be addressed including educators, railwaymen, sailors, postal workers, industrials and labour unions. The list did not mention the more obvious group of military soldiers. Twelve years after the end of World War I, this suggests that the French health agitator considered educational films for the specific audience of military soldiers to be distinct from health education in schools and the “general public” treated in his handbook.

Taking Viborel’s observation that films needed to be “minutely adapted to their environment” seriously, this contribution inquires if, when, how and why venereal disease (VD) prevention films for the military sphere were adapted to their specific audience. The paper also examines the continued production of military VD films during the interwar period in France, which was left unacknowledged by Viborel. In doing so, it also addresses how these films differed from VD films for the general public.

As exemplified by the story of the VD prevention films produced by the United States Armed Forces Commission on Training Camp Activities (CTCA),³ films initially produced for a military audience crossed boundaries into the public sphere after WWI. There they provoked heated debates about their acceptability and status, eventually leading to supervision and censorship.⁴ As message films – meaning here that they were made for other reasons than entertainment or art – health prevention films can be studied

1 Viborel 1930.

2 Viborel 1930, 404.

3 See the introduction of the thematic section for more detail. Brownlow 1990; Schaefer 1999, 24–27.

4 Schaefer 1999; Eberwein 1999; Kuhn 1988.