

America Gets Off: The Great Depression as an Impetus for the Evolution of Pornography

Brick Cullum

History

Faculty advisor: Dr. Vaughn Scribner

Gordon Parks was sixteen years old in 1929, a young black man trying to work his way through high school in St. Paul, Minnesota, as a bellboy at a downtown club for white businessmen. One Wednesday afternoon, a notice was tacked to the employee bulletin board: 'Because of unforeseen circumstances, some personnel will be laid off the first of next month. Those directly affected will be notified in due time.' Parks recalled, "I read everything I could get my hands on, gathering in the full meaning . . . I couldn't imagine such financial disaster touching my small world; it surely concerned only the rich. But by the first week of November I . . . knew differently; along with millions of others across the nation, I was without a job . . ."

Countless individuals shared the feelings of dread that plagued Gordon Parks in the autumn of 1929 during the Great Depression. The economic crash—predicted by some for years—led to thousands of business failures, millions of unemployed, and billions of dollars lost in bank catastrophes. Trust in the future was shattered, hope was lost, and the former 'valiant' American spirit was flattened. People like Gordon Parks were unable to provide food, shelter, and other basic necessities for life. As Parks described, "The hawk had

come. I could already feel his wings shadowing me." It was a shadow that would not be lifted for nearly a decade.¹

On the surface, American society seemed to be entirely enveloped in hardship and crisis during the 1930s; but deeper, underneath the "shadow," there was an increasingly vibrant piece of culture flourishing in spite of the economic calamity. Emerging from the smoke-filled rooms of Depression-era bars, the back-alleys of clubs, and on the sides of roads in the middle of nowhere, pornography prospered during the Great Depression.² This growth occurred even though numerous Americans were simply hoping for a return to normal conditions, to economic and social stability. Truly, as Morris Dickstein exemplifies, with "values in flux . . . this was the American dream with a dark coloring."³

Of course, pornography existed *well* before the Great Depression, just not in any widespread form. This was predominately due to the fact that obscenity restrictions were deeply engrained in American laws. Originating from a British court case, the 'Hicklin' rule allotted that any work must be considered entirely obscene if even one part is questionable.⁴ This rule was utilized by many U.S. courts as a guide for restricting pornographic or obscene

¹ Tom H. Watkins, *The Great Depression: America in the 1930s* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1993), 51-55.

² Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the 'Frenzy of the Visible'* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989), 87-95.

³ Morris Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of the Great Depression* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009), 313.

⁴ Paul Siegel, *Communication Law in America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2008), 452.

material. From the 1870s through the earliest decades of the twentieth century, a federal worker named Anthony Comstock worked as a supposed “special agent,” seizing and destroying anything found to be of prurient interest in the mail, which included magazines, post cards, and photographs.⁵ Despite such attempts at censorship, occasional road-side or back room showings of soft-core pornography occurred rather regularly prior to the 1930s, and brief nude prints were available for those who searched hard enough. Truly, pornography’s illegal nature made it a tough commodity to come by prior to the Great Depression. Only after a groundbreaking court case changed the legal understanding of obscenity in literature would pornography begin to enter mainstream society.⁶

Though several scholars have discussed the rise of pornography as an important aspect of American history, their efforts have primarily focused on the importance of the female body as a patriotic symbol used to aid American soldiers in World War II, the subsequent implications of which created the pornography industry that prospers today. In *New Views on Pornography: Sexuality, Politics, and the Law*, Lynn Comella and Shira Tarrant argue that it was the Eighteenth Amendment that forced pornography into the shadows of American culture. In their contention, it would take decades for pornography to be viewed in a new light. Walter Kendrick describes the origins of pornography in ancient Greek civilization, and juxtaposes it next to the rise of pornography

⁵ Williams, *Hard Core*, 85.

⁶ Al Di Lauro and Gerald Rabkin, *Dirty Movies: An Illustrated History of the Stag Film, 1915-1970* (New York: Chelsea House, 1976) 43-52.

throughout American history in *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture*. In the aptly titled, *A History of Pornography*, H. Montgomery Hyde debates that it was only because of the American legal system's growing scope on obscenity that pornography eventually became a staple of culture. *The Porning of America: The Rise of Porn Culture, What It Means, and Where We Go from Here*, written by Carmine Sarracino and Kevin M. Scott, argues that it was the sexualizing of women during the second World War that allowed pornography to flourish in America. Ralph Stein's thoroughly illustrated, *The Pin-Up: From 1852 to Now*, finally discusses that pornography evolved and became a staple of America because of public interest in pin-ups, with his firsthand account of the 1920s, 30s, and 40s displayed as a centerpiece of evidence.⁷

No research, however, has provided insight into the Great Depression's role in the evolution of pornography in America. Recognizing this historiographical gap, this paper argues that many Americans attempted to escape the economic and psychological crisis caused by the Great Depression (1929 to 1939) by consuming pornography. Not only did the depleted workforce transform gender roles to create a unique environment where men could subject women (at least visually and psychologically) in an effort to assert their masculinity, but, as this paper demonstrates, men's access to

⁷ Lynn Comella and Shira Tarrant, ed., *New Views on Pornography: Sexuality, Politics, and the Law* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2015); Walter Kendrick, *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture* (New York: Viking, 1987); Harford M. Hyde, *A History of Pornography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1964); Carmine Sarracino and Kevin M. Scott, *The Porning of America: The Rise of Porn Culture, What It Means, and Where We Go from Here* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2008); Ralph Stein, *The Pin-Up: From 1852 to Now* (London: The Ridge Press, 1974).

pornography also grew as the Great Depression progressed because of changing opinions towards ideas of obscenity. Ultimately, pornography flourished during the Great Depression, which fostered growth that is still evident today. Though it is true that no direct literature has emerged about the role of the Great Depression in perpetuating the growth of pornography, works geared towards specific cultural aspects provide intuition as to why citizens would invest so heavily in pornography when many could barely afford food.

Pornography served, to many, as a relief from the social and emotional grief caused by the Great Depression. Perhaps the most impressive sources of pornography were the infamous Tijuana Bibles, small comic strips that depicted overtly sexual, crude acts in an attempt to be humorous. Despite being highly illegal, Tijuana Bibles—also known as eight-pagers—were sold in millions under counters and in bars. People paid a high price to be able to laugh, have fun, and escape social calamity.⁸ The growth of magazines containing airbrushed, half-naked women also expounds upon the fact that many looked to sexual excitement for relief. *Esquire*, accurately titled a “gentleman’s magazine,” was incredibly popular during the Great Depression for its early pin-up illustrations.⁹ Though reprieve was certainly an outward goal of those who consumed pornography during the 1930s, there was a deeper consideration made in that many men felt emasculated—without

⁸ Bob Adelman, *Tijuana Bibles: Art and Wit in America’s Forbidden Funnies, 1930s-1950s* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 5-10.

⁹ Despina Kakoudaki, “Pinup: The American Secret Weapon in World War II,” in *Porn Studies*, ed. Linda Williams (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 338-345.

jobs, men no longer had a socialized sense of being powerful, and were at a disadvantage compared to their female counterparts. Thus, pornography became a vehicle for the subjugation of women in an attempt to give men a sense of being when they had none; pornography thrived in accordance with this ideal.¹⁰ Of course, legal change helped perpetuate the growth of pornography as well. The most pivotal legal precedent to help stimulate pornography arose from the 1933 United States District Court case, *United States v. One Book Called Ulysses*. The case, which emerged over the issue of James Joyce's novel *Ulysses* being inappropriate for readers, resulted in a new legal ruling that a work should not be panned as obscene if it is not actually meant to be interpreted that way. With less legal force controlling the arts, pornography prospered.¹¹

The Great Depression served, in all areas of society, as a powerful impulse for deep and dramatic change—what had once been an American spirit was thereby turned to a nightmare. For example, a teacher working during the early years of the Great Depression described one of her young students as being “fidgety” and “uncontrollable” in class. When she told the student to go home and grab a snack and come back ready to learn, the young student simply replied, “I can’t, it’s my sister’s turn to eat.”¹² This strife was experienced by millions during the Great Depression—with such misfortune, it is only right to assume that individuals would look for a means to escape, if even for a moment. For many, the escape was to the humorous, provocative, crudely drawn, and droll Tijuana Bibles.

¹⁰ Di Lauro and Rabkin, *Dirty Movies*, 55-68.

¹¹ Hyde, *History of Pornography*, 6-7.

¹² Watkins, *The Great Depression*, 57.

Almost exactly in time with the start of the Great Depression, Tijuana Bibles began to circulate relentlessly, primarily relying on a “peculiar combination of debauchery and innocence” to amuse.¹³ For example, in “She Will Be Coming Around the Mountain,” a redneck is depicted deflowering a sweet Elsie-May until, of course, her Pappy shoots him in the hind quarters.

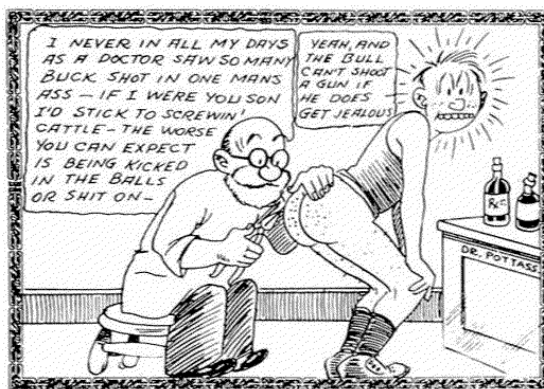


Figure 1: “She Will Be Coming Around the Mountain” provokes laughter, particularly with scenes such as this, wherein a doctor helps the man after his conflict with Pappy. However, the largely sexual tone cannot be missed.

This humorous, though certainly obscene, depiction incites laughter and enjoyment—in the midst of the Great Depression, it is clear that the intent was to amuse and provide entertainment.¹⁴ In another popular eight-pager, “Donald Duck Has a Universal Desire,” a popular cartoon character from the 1930s was sexualized in a witty

¹³ Adelman, *Tijuana Bibles*, 6-10.

¹⁴ “She Will Be Coming Around the Mountain,” in *Tijuana Bibles*, 51.

way, as he is portrayed searching for another duck to have sex with.¹⁵



Figure 2: “Donald Duck Has a Universal Desire” is filled with outrageous renderings of the popular character as an almost human-like being with high sexual desire. This was incredibly entertaining during the Great Depression.

Truly, Tijuana Bibles drew on the public’s growing desire for a fun escape from economic hardship—this dramatically pushed pornography into cultural popularity. Al Capp, a famous cartoonist from the 1930s, noted that he had officially struck fame when his characters began to appear in pornographic comic strips.¹⁶

The popularity of Tijuana Bibles boomed during the 1930s. Citizens treated them much like collectibles—*who could have the biggest collection? Who could get the newest copy first?* Though prominent sources of liberation, pin-ups also prospered as a result of

¹⁵ “Donald Duck Has a Universal Desire,” in *Tijuana Bibles*, 42.

¹⁶ Adelman, *Tijuana Bibles*, 6.

society's need for escape from hardship. The 1930s were the "heyday of famous shedders of outer coverings," and art magazines that contained sexual drawings grew incredibly popular. Women were depicted with high sexual appetites, and images like this proved a very effective distraction from calamity.



Figure 3: "Marlene Dietrich," in The Pin-Up, 112; this was an incredibly popular pin-up in the 1930s, showcasing actress Marlene Dietrich and her lusted after legs.

Ralph Stein, a writer and photographer, describes his memory of the industry growing during the 1930s as a side effect of the times. At the 1933 Century of Progress Exposition in Chicago, he noted, topless women were the main attraction, with countless fans hoping to obtain autographs and pictures—truly, a new "enlightened acceptance of nudity" emerged, with which pornography flourished.¹⁷ As well, many magazines used pin-up style drawings of

¹⁷ Stein, *The Pin-Up*, 96-103.

sexualized girls to gain attention. For example, there is bold emphasis on the woman's legs in this advertisement—the intent was clearly to be overtly provocative, which garnered much acclaim and ensured success for its parent magazine, *Esquire*.

Women were airbrushed in bras, advertising cigars (clearly phallic shaped) and entertaining men, which illustrated the yearning for a sexual escape from the trouble of the era. For example, *Esquire* (which first ran in 1933) had an initial print of 100,000 copies. This was astonishingly large considering that, for many, 1933 was the hardest year of the Great Depression. Within two years, *Esquire* had a monthly print of over 600,000 copies, and an issue cost fifty cents. To put that into perspective, a steak in 1933 cost only eighteen cents a pound.¹⁸ It is abundantly evident then that pornography in any form was valued and consumed highly during the Great Depression—individuals needed some form of entertainment to serve as a distraction from the economic and social devastation of the times, and pornographic material worked perfectly.

¹⁸ Kakoudaki, *Porn Studies*, 346-347.



Figure 4: "Old Gold," in *Porn Studies*, 346-347; this advertisement displays a sexualized woman selling cigarettes with a caption that emphasizes her body to the consumer. This is representative of the bigger picture—consumers did not purchase *Esquire* because it had cigarette ads, they purchased it because it contained sexual imagery, which helped them forget about what was going on in the world around.

The notions of simple relief accurately portray why pornography began to flourish during the Great Depression, with the economic calamity as a prime impetus for growth. But beneath that, there was a darker motive behind the rise of pornography in America. As Josep M. Armengol argues, the earliest decades of the twentieth century were marked by an evolution wherein men derived their sense of being from their economic efforts. With economic failure and a depleted workforce as in the Great

Depression, men lost their sense of self and felt inferior to women in all realms of society. No longer breadwinners, men felt as though they had to subject women in some way, might they be able to hold on to their identity. Pornography posed as an efficient way to do this—women could be easily lowered in the visual realm, shown to millions, and essentially reinforce masculinity in a time when it was most vulnerable.¹⁹

Stag films, often viewed in shabby roadside theaters that countless men attended for a small charge, were riddled with gender-based undertones. In *Matinee Idol*, a 1930s stag, a zoomed in shot of a penis entering a vagina is captured for the audience. As historians Di Lauro and Rabkin contend, this shot “illustrated the myth of male dominance (man literally over woman) [and] . . . showed the viewer that he was getting his money’s worth.” This shot, portrayed in most stag films, was meant to remind men that they were on top in many regards, not just sexually. It was a huge draw to pornography during the Great Depression, and it encouraged the industry to grow in accordance. *The Hypnotist* renders a woman helpless against the seductions of a magical man, and she is visualized as nothing but a slave to sexual desires. A woman caves easily to the efforts of an empowered, macho man in *The Modern Magician*. Yet another stag, *A Stiff Game*, paints a woman as the plaything of two men and their cravings. *A Stiff Game* also

¹⁹ Josep M. Armengol, “Gendering the Great Depression: Rethinking the Male Body in 1930s American Culture and Literature,” *Journal of Gender Studies* 23, no. 1 (2014): 59-68.

“acknowledges the reality of the Great Depression,” which alludes to the economic impact on pornography and its consumption.²⁰

This unique environment created by the Great Depression also cast a shadow in other areas of pornography as the 1930s progressed. Tijuana Bibles, a staple of pornographic culture, frequently depicted the struggle for reassertion of male dominance. In “The Rescue,” two scenes are depicted: in the first, a man ties up a woman and proceeds to have sex with her against her will, and in the second, a man rescues the woman and has sex with her willingly.²¹ This Tijuana Bible represents the feelings that men had during the Great Depression, as in any form, willing or not, women were beneath men visually and psychologically.



Figure 5: “All in a Day’s Work” is a valuable insight into the interests of individuals during the Great Depression. Note how this woman stands as a subject for the man’s pleasure—she takes on no other purpose. This reaffirmed man’s place, behind the desk, as a worker who provides for his family.

²⁰ Di Lauro and Rabkin, *Dirty Movies*, 66-71.

²¹ “The Rescue,” in *Tijuana Bibles*, 18.

Another popular comic strip, “All in a Day’s Work,” pictures a young man hard at work while also being *hard* at work—the women in his office cannot stop having sex with him in various locations throughout the day.²² The notion that the man has a job is representative of the desire for success most men had in the Great Depression, but the sexual empowerment speaks highly of the position men wanted to see themselves in. These themes are presented even more obviously in the highly popular “No Pay,” which depicts an unemployed man having sex with a wealthy woman.²³ Thus, it is evident that no matter what medium of pornography individuals consumed during the Great Depression, there were largely gender based undertones meant to reassert masculine dominance in society. Men felt largely at odds with life as a result of a depleted workforce, and pornography helped to visually and psychologically reaffirm their existence.

Though laws had harshly controlled obscenity before the Great Depression, the emergence of a cultural appreciation for pornography created a new challenge to perceived traditional notions. Even in milder forms, the early twentieth century saw pornography heavily oppressed. When *The Well of Loneliness*, a book with sexual themes, came up for publication in America, “the authorities launched a prosecution . . . in which [a critic named] James Douglas, declared that he would rather put a phial of prussic acid in the hands of a healthy girl or boy than the book in question.” This was an attitude shared by numerous legal officials and, arguably, many average citizens who simply wanted cultural

²² “All in a Days Work,” in *Tijuana Bibles*, 39.

²³ “No Pay,” in *Tijuana Bibles*, 43.

ordinariness. Considering that for many even mentioning sex was inappropriate, new popular forms of pornography were startling. Pornography and sexuality were so suppressed before the Great Depression that many young men reported feeling nervous about sex, as they had no exposure in any form. But the demand for new pornography in all regards was undeniable—the acceleration of underground trading was outstanding. Samuel Roth, a popular trader in the 1930s, “conducted a flourishing business in erotic and pornographic [material] . . . he received three prison sentences . . . [yet] had a mailing list of 40,000 names.”²⁴ Truly, with pornography’s newfound popularity juxtaposed against harsh legal restrictions, a turning point soon emerged from a work of fiction entitled *Ulysses*.

By 1930, James Joyce’s novel, *Ulysses*, had prompted a great deal of criticism from censorship agencies in America. With passages detailing promiscuity, sexuality, and supposedly lewd behavior, *Ulysses* was viewed by many as pornographic smut. In 1933 the United States District Court for the Southern District of New York analyzed the issue in *United States v. One Book Called Ulysses*. The case was a bitter debate between old world views of impurity and a new foundation of society that argued for greater access to obscene material as a form of expression and enjoyment. Judge Woolsey, who recorded the opinion of the court, ultimately judged that the book was not obscene and should be allowed in America—in his decision, Woolsey contended that “Joyce did not write *Ulysses* with what is commonly called pornographic intent.”²⁵ Woolsey further qualified

²⁴ Hyde, *History of Pornography*, 3-185.

²⁵ “United States vs. One Book Called ‘Ulysses,’” in *Hard Core*, 87-95.

that books and works of art must be interpreted in entirety, and not in a miniscule way—this “bespoke the doom of the Hicklin rule” and changed the way in which legal institutions perceived nudity, sexuality, and pornography in general. By attaching the notion of expression to pornographic material, a precedent was set: citizens could now more freely access pornography, as there were less constraints. To illustrate such stark contrast, when World War II erupted at the end of the Great Depression, the United States government actually promoted pornographic images (in the form of patriotic pin-ups) to heighten morale and success.²⁶ Thus, the changing scope of obscenity restrictions promoted growth in the pornography industry, as it was allowed to flourish and truly spread for the first time.

The Great Depression was the worst economic crisis in American history—millions of people lost jobs, banks failed, and businesses closed forever. The social and cultural calamity of the chaotic 1930s stretched deep into the American psyche; however, this research emphasizes that numerous individuals sought escape from social crisis by consuming pornography. Deeper, the motivation was largely on behalf of men, who used pornography as a visual tool to reinstate their masculinity while simultaneously forcing women into femininity. As well, changing legal views of obscenity created a society where pornography was much easier to access, and thus it thrived. These findings suggest a hitherto unsuspected aspect of the rise of pornography, that the Great Depression acted as an impetus for the growth of the industry, which was previously shadowed and thereafter unveiled to the public forever.

²⁶ Sarracino and Scott, *The Porning of America*, 52.

References

- Al Di Lauro and Gerald Rabkin, *Dirty Movies: An Illustrated History of the Stag Film, 1915-1970* (New York: Chelsea House, 1976).
- Bob Adelman, *Tijuana Bibles: Art and Wit in America's Forbidden Funnies, 1930s-1950s* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997).
- Carmine Sarracino and Kevin M. Scott, *The Porning of America: The Rise of Porn Culture, What It Means, and Where We Go from Here* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2008).
- Despina Kakoudaki, "Pinup: The American Secret Weapon in World War II," in *Porn Studies*, ed. Linda Williams (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).
- Harford M. Hyde, *A History of Pornography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1964).
- Josep M. Armengol, "Gendering the Great Depression: Rethinking the Male Body in 1930s American Culture and Literature," *Journal of Gender Studies* 23, no. 1 (2014).
- Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the 'Frenzy of the Visible'* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989).
- Lynn Comella and Shira Tarrant, ed., *New Views on Pornography: Sexuality, Politics, and the Law* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2015).
- Morris Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of the Great Depression* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009).
- Paul Siegel, *Communication Law in America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2008).
- Ralph Stein, *The Pin-Up: From 1852 to Now* (London: The Ridge Press, 1974).
- Tom H. Watkins, *The Great Depression: America in the 1930s* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1993).
- Walter Kendrick, *The Secret Museum: Pornography in Modern Culture* (New York: Viking, 1987).