

Where Are My Children?

By Shelley Stamp

Late in 1916, as Margaret Sanger stepped up her campaign to legalize contraception, commentators noticed that birth control had become a popular topic in several “weighty picture dramas.”¹ Of the many films released on this issue, “Where Are My Children?” was by far the most popular, profitable and controversial. Written and directed by Lois Weber, it was part of an ambitious program of films she made on key social issues in the mid-1910s, including addiction, poverty, and the fight to abolish capital punishment. She considered cinema a “living newspaper” capable of exploring contemporary debates for popular audiences. “Lois Weber,” one contemporary commentary noted, “can deal successfully with subjects which other directors would not dare to touch for fear of condemnation.”²

Weber’s script, adapted from the stage play “The Unborn” by Lucy Paton and Franklin Hall, intertwines legal battles around contraception with more intimate marital struggles over reproduction, focusing on the character of District Attorney Richard Walton (Tyrone Power). Richard comes to favor family planning during the trial of a doctor accused of circulating contraceptive information to impoverished working-class women overburdened with large families, poor health and abusive relationships. Yet later, while prosecuting another doctor for performing abortions, Richard discovers that his wife and her society friends have been availing themselves of the doctor’s services. His climactic cry, “Where are my children?” accuses Edith Walton (Helen Riaume) and her friends of murder. “Where Are My Children?” thus makes a eugenicist argument in favor of birth control for working-class and immigrant families, while lambasting privileged white women for not “bettering” the race, vilifying them further through their association with abortion, rather than contraception. As several reviewers pointed out at the time, this dichotomy inverted family planning practices of the day, for it was impoverished women, less likely to have access to adequate contraception, who were often forced to rely on unsafe abortions, while their wealthier counterparts practiced safe and effective family planning with tacit help from the medical establishment. Interweaving these multiple story lines through patterns of cross-cutting, the film makes clear that while men legislate reproductive issues in public courtrooms, women, excluded from these debates, carry on clandestine conversations in private.



Glass slides like this one would have been projected in local theaters to promote the film. Courtesy of Mark L. Johnson.

The film’s message about sexuality, reproduction and contraception is further clouded by a subplot involving the housekeeper’s daughter Lillian (Rena Rogers). A naïve young woman, she is lured into a liaison with Edith’s lothario brother Roger (A.D. Blake). Lillian becomes pregnant – “the wages of sin,” a title informs us – and ultimately dies from an unsafe abortion she procures with Edith’s help. Lillian’s narrative adds another dimension to the film’s portrayal of unplanned pregnancy and complicates its overlay of abortion and contraception. If “Where Are My Children?” seems to advocate birth control for impoverished women, while simultaneously denouncing Edith’s wealthy circle for their reliance on abortion, in Lillian’s case the message is less clear. Would Lillian’s life have been spared if she had access to reliable contraception? The film does not go so far as to promote reproductive freedom for consenting, unmarried adults, a case Margaret Sanger was indeed making in the 1910s, but Lillian’s subplot introduces the topic of sexuality outside reproduction, albeit with a rather clichéd tale of a male predator and his gullible victim.

With its frank treatment of sexuality and reproduction, “Where Are My Children?” presented something of a challenge to the National Board of Review, then charged with approving pictures released by the major companies. Mindful of the fact that it was one of the first films to address these issues, the Board openly debated whether a topic that had been so widely discussed in print media could be banned from the screen.³ Yet, after convening a panel of

medical experts to assess the picture, the Board voted to reject “Where Are My Children?”, not on the grounds of its subject matter *per se*, but because it presented medical misinformation. Cranston Brenton, Chairman of the National Board, feared that the picture “so confuses the question of birth control and abortion that even a second viewing of the picture failed to make the distinction clear.”⁴

Eager to release a film made by one of its best directors on a highly topical subject, Universal fought the Board’s ruling. The studio added a disclaimer to film prints asking whether a “subject of serious interest” ought to be “denied careful dramatization on the motion picture screen,” operating as if the Board had censured the film because of its controversial subject matter, rather than concerns about its potential to mislead viewers about contraception and abortion. After hosting invited screenings for prominent clergy and social reformers in New York, Universal put the film into national release – still without securing Board approval.

Film industry trade papers chronicled the battle with great interest, for rarely, if ever, had a major production company flouted the Board’s condemnation with such untested subject matter: it was still illegal, after all, to disseminate contraceptive information in *any* medium, let alone one designed for such a mass audience. Most in the trades felt the subject had been handled with tact and defended the cinema’s ability to grapple with such controversial topics.⁵ Lynde Denig of “Moving Picture World” was the most enthusiastic, praising the filmmakers’ “sincere, courageous and intelligent effort.” Not simply a good picture, “Where Are My Children?” provided a model of how photoplays should advance “if there are to contribute to a better understanding of...the complexities of modern society.”⁶

While obviously eager to endorse cinema’s ability to tackle weighty issues like contraception, trade commentators were more reluctant to endorse the film’s particular message. “It starts off seemingly as an argument in favor of birth control and suddenly switches to an argument against abortions,” “Variety” complained.⁷ With no differentiation “between birth control, race suicide, and abortion,” the “New York Dramatic Mirror” objected, the film ended up with a “confusing” message.⁸ Those within the film industry were not the only ones to condemn the film’s contradictory logic. When “Where Are My Children?” played in Portland, Oregon, members of the local Birth Control League protested that the film’s failure to distinguish between “birth control properly speaking and abortion” generated “misunderstanding and confusion” about their objectives.⁹

Despite these objections, the film drew large audiences across the country in 1916, released just as activist Margaret Sanger was embarking on a nationwide speaking tour, drawing wide-spread attention to the battle over birth control. While banned in Pennsylvania by that state’s Board of Censorship, “Where Are My Children?” encountered little trouble in other markets. Even Boston’s censorship commission, notorious for its strict enforcement, did not prevent the film from being shown in that city where it proved so popular that some 2,000 patrons were turned away on opening night and it continued to generate “enormous business” during a run of several months.

So popular was “Where Are My Children?” that one year later “Photoplay” complained it had spawned a “filthy host of nasty-minded imitators.”¹⁰ Weber herself returned to the topic late in 1917 with “The Hand That Rocks the Cradle,” a clear call for legal contraception less clouded by eugenics than its predecessor. In her last appearance onscreen Weber played birth control advocate Louise Broome, a thinly veiled portrait of Sanger. Imprisoned for circulating birth control information, Broome ultimately wins the fight to legalize contraception. “What do you think?,” the film’s final title asks, inviting audiences to talk amongst themselves.

¹ *Motography*, 9 December 1916, 1297.

² Marjorie Howard, “Even As You and I’, A Drama of Souls at Bay,” *Moving Picture Weekly*, 14 Apr 1917, 18.

³ Letter from McGuire to the General Committee, 18 March 1916, Box 107, National Board of Review of Motion Picture Collection, New York Public Library (NBRMPC).

⁴ Unidentified correspondence, n.d., Box 107, NBRMPC.

⁵ See “Birth Control Discussion with Conditions Plainly Pictured,” *Wid’s*, 20 April 1916, 524; *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 22 April 1916, 42; and *Variety*, 14 April 1916, 26.

⁶ *Moving Picture World*, 29 April 1916, 817.

⁷ *Variety*, 14 April 1916, 26.

⁸ *New York Dramatic Mirror*, 22 April 1916, 42.

⁹ “Control League Differs,” *Portland Oregon News*, 18 November 1916, n.p., Box 107, NBRMPC.

¹⁰ “Next Needs in Anatomy,” *Photoplay*, April 1917, 100.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

Shelley Stamp is Professor of Film & Digital Media at the University of California, Santa Cruz. This essay is adapted from her book Lois Weber in Early Hollywood, winner of the Richard Wall Special Jury Prize from the Theatre Library Association.