

AUDREY MUNSON ON FILM: PURITY IN AN AGE OF CENSORSHIP

by Cynthia Chris

Prologue

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*To walk from the street into the movie theater is . . .
to enter a world of dreams.*

—Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry*, 1947

I sit in a darkened room, waiting, wordless. A woman appears. She is alone, arms outstretched, bathed in red light. She is clothed in swaths of the sheerest fabric. Thin strips draped over her shoulders form a blouse that parts as she moves. She leans forward, baring the slope of her breast. I lean forward, too. She demurs, and turns away. The scene ends, and she is gone. My companion draws in a breath. We are watching *Purity* (1916), featuring the artist's model Audrey Munson.

. . .

Part One

Everything for me becomes allegory.

—Charles Baudelaire, *The Swan*, 1861

In the first two acts of *Purity*, Munson plays Virtue, foremost among several allegorical female figures emerging in the mind of a poet as he writes. She poses on an otherworldly mountain crag, then descends to amble through a woodsy Paradise. Virtue visits the

Muses of various arts, walks hand-in-hand with Truth, and gently embraces Love in blue moonlight. In a series of discretely spectacular scenes, bearing vestigial traces of the traditions of the early “cinema of attractions,”¹ a crowd gathers in a field to dance,



and a group of children play flutes, all costumed in vaguely Grecian garb, flowing togas, and fitted tunics. But a story is unfolding: despite Virtue’s efforts to preserve Paradise, Pandora unleashes Evil (played by William Carroll), introducing rapacious lust and violence to the world. Virtue escapes unscathed, returning to her mountaintop solitude.

At the end of the second act, the poet, Thornton Darcy (Nigel de Brullier), falls asleep in the woods, near a stream. He wakes to find a young woman who resembles his imaginary muse nearby. Her name is Purity Worth (also played by Munson). They fall in love, shifting the film toward a more surely sustained narrative in the next four acts. Purity encourages Darcy to publish his poems, but the publisher asks for five hundred dollars toward the cost of printing the books. Unable to pay this fee, Darcy falls ill

from despair. Purity visits the stream where she and Darcy met. Undressing to bathe, she is unknowingly observed by the artist Claude Lamarque (Alfred Hollingsworth), who invites her to pose for him. She accepts, but only to earn money to finance the publication of Darcy’s poems, asking both the painter and the publisher for anonymity. While modeling for Lamarque, Purity takes on additional work enacting statuary poses at a party and fends off a friend of the painter (William Carroll, again) who assumes because she is a model that she is sexually available. Meanwhile, Darcy’s book is published, and he recovers. Celebrating his success, he happens to meet Lamarque at a party. Invited to visit the artist’s studio, he recognizes Purity as the figure Virtue in Lamarque’s painting. Disgusted by her immodest labor, he abandons her, until learning that she modeled only for his sake. He asks her forgiveness, and they reunite.

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Part Two

I’m not shy. I’ve been looked at before.

—Stella (Thelma Ritter), in *Rear Window*, 1954

Purity was Munson’s second film; it was directed by Rea Berger for the American Film Company and distributed by Mutual Film Corporation. The National Board of Review demanded cuts throughout that allowed the nude only at a distance, posed in stillness or glimpsed momentarily. Scenes in which Munson could be seen partially dressed (“robe parted”) or undressed (“posing in the nude”), in close-up, were to be cut. In the bathing scene, a shot of Munson’s dress falling was to be cut, as well as “all scenes where Miss Munson is walking around the studio in the nude.” “Prolonged views” of the naked body

were to be cut “to flashes,” “fade-in, instant fade-out.”² The statuesque body, in dim long shot, permitted; the individual body, in motion, in scrutiny, impossible.

Even after these cuts were made, the film was banned in Kansas and by local authorities in cities including Dallas and Washington. The *New York Times* called Purity “offensive,” claiming the “beautiful figure of a famous model exploited on the screen.”³ In Purity—as well as in *Inspiration* (1915) and *The Girl O’ Dreams* (1917)—Munson plays a model, a classical physical type and perfect muse, ever-chaste and good-hearted even if deceit and desire beset those around her, in narratives that seem to draw on Munson’s own life story. Her fourth and final film, *Heedless Moths* (1921) derives from the “Queen of the Artists’ Studios” series written by Munson for the *New York American’s Sunday* magazine. In this film, Munson poses in studio scenes, but Jane Thomas plays her role in dramatic sequences. Rarely mentioned in film histories, Munson’s film work was long assumed entirely lost, but in fact a print of Purity is held in the archives of the Centre National de la Cinématographie in Paris.

By the time of Purity’s release, public entertainment, nudity, and the sexual body had already long been subject to morality campaigns and legal measures in the United States. Following English precedent, the live performance of stage plays was subject to regulation in Colonial America by 1665.⁴ In 1865, a new law banned the sending of pornographic material through the U.S. mail, in response to a fad for pinups among soldiers during the Civil War. In 1873, as new visual technologies for reproducing images multiplied, Congress enacted the more far-ranging Comstock Act. The act, named for its chief proponent, Anthony Comstock, founder of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice, allowed for the prosecution of anyone selling, publishing, sending through the mail, or owning loosely defined “obscene” or “immoral” material, specifically targeting contraceptive devices and printed information about birth control or abortion. The latter provisions were relaxed in 1936 and overturned only in 1971. Portions of the Comstock Act form the basis of current obscenity laws and laws regulating the importation and mailing of abortifacients.

Comstock found obscenity everywhere, boasting that he was responsible for the destruction of millions of photographs, and tons of books, photographic negatives, printing plates, and condoms. He prosecuted dealers of photographic reproductions of female nudes, most by established French painters, until a case against the well-known gallerist Roland Knoedler, in 1887, offended elite Gilded Age New York industrialists who had supported Comstock when his targets were mass-market images and texts believed to have debauching effects on the young and “the common mind.” Meanwhile, representations of the male body in American art, such as Thomas Eakins’



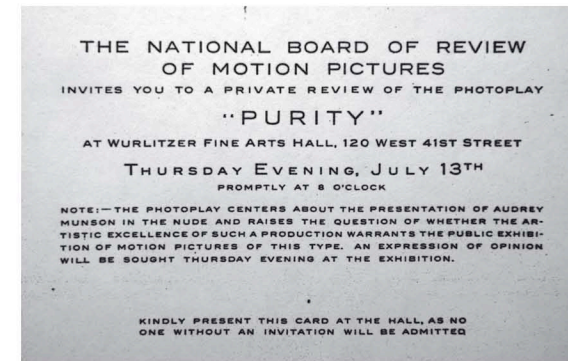
Swimming (1885), were both championed and assailed for their casual nudity, and Eakins' methods—anatomical lessons and the use of undraped models in life drawing classes—may have contributed to his dismissal from the post of director of instruction at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in 1886.

A century turns. As the Gilded Age gave way to the Progressive Era, new kinds of entertainments, including the motion picture, emerged, first in kinoscope parlors, then in nickelodeons, attracting an audience largely working class, immigrant, Catholic, and Jewish, and often youthful. Educators, social workers and clergy of the Protestant middle class only intensified their interest in patrolling the moral welfare of the so-called underclasses. As early as 1897, court cases began to determine that particular films constituted “an outrage upon public decency.” By 1907 (first in Chicago), municipalities were establishing procedures through which local authorities would preview, censor, and issue licenses to motion pictures prior to exhibition: unlicensed films could not be exhibited in public theaters. The Chicago board was legitimated by a court ruling that congratulated efforts to censor cinema because its “audiences include those classes whose age, education and situation in life specially entitle them to protection against an evil influence of obscene and immoral representations.” The paternalism of the censorship boards was upheld, most famously and fundamentally, in 1915, in *Mutual Film Corporation v. Industrial Commission of Ohio*, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that moving pictures were exempt from free speech and free press provisions of the First Amendment to the Constitution. Condoning prior restraint of expression, one justice wrote that motion pictures are “capable of evil, having power for it, the greater because of the attractiveness and manner of exhibition.”⁵ The *Mutual* ruling stood until 1952, but state and municipal review boards lingered long after: for example, in Chicago and Maryland, into the 1960s, and in Dallas, until 1993.

While in the United States, forms of censorship proliferated, elsewhere, the body was being radically reenvisioned. The German Nacktkultur celebrated nudity. Modern dancers and choreographers, such as the American Isadora Duncan (working primarily in France, Germany, and Russia), innovated the conventions of performing and began to radically reveal the performer's body. In the U.S. and in Europe, the Beaux-Arts style continued to revive classical motifs in architecture and art, including the

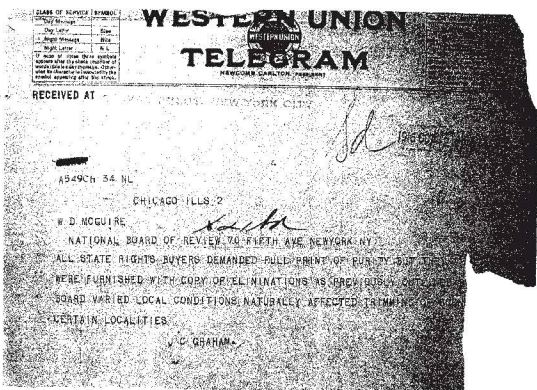
public sculptures for which Audrey Munson modeled. Meanwhile, new generations of European artists redefined accepted modes of representing the body, defining beauty, and selecting subjects for figurative art. These movements explored meanings of the body—naturalistic, nationalistic, athletic, aesthetic—and treated the individual body, often naked and in motion, as integral to the ideal social body. But late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century America, laden with its Puritanical legacy and lingering

Victorian morals, treated images of the body as dangers to public morals and struggled to restrict access to such images and to control the meaning of the body. When the Fauvists, Cubists, and other artists working in new styles were first seen in the U.S. at Alfred Stieglitz's Gallery 291, critics for the *New York Evening Mail* called a 1908 exhibition of Henri Matisse's work “appalling,” and Pablo Picasso's drawings and etchings, shown in 1911, were, according to the *New York Globe*, “lunatic.” Similar criticism assailed artists such as Constantin Brancusi and Marcel Duchamp when their work was exhibited in The Armory Show of 1913 in New York. While some found the show exhilarating, former president Teddy Roosevelt and Chicago art students were among the many who ridiculed the new art, and the Vice Commission of Illinois was called upon to investigate the show when it was reinstalled at the Art Institute of Chicago.



While censors sought to excise sexual content from early cinema, mythological, biblical, and other historical themes continued to provide opportunity to display the body nude, or nearly so, in revealing costumes or without costume. Later, as antiquity became a less common motif, activities like swimming allowed for nudity, as in *Ecstasy* (1933).⁶ But the role of the artist's model has persisted, since the earliest years of the cinema, not only to suggest the body exposed, but also to mark a character as “fallen,” immoral, a victim, possibly a kept woman or prostitute. As early as 1903—twelve years before Munson's film career began—in *The Fate of the Artist's Model*, an artist abandons a woman who was his lover and model, leaving her and her child without means. Contemporaries to Munson's film work, such as *The Devil* (1915), *The Devil's Needle* (1916), and *The Painted Lie* (1917), depict models estranged, disreputable, doomed. Modeling, in these films, leads to adultery, drug addiction, and an engagement broken. In contrast, Munson's films sought to portray the model as a creative cultural worker, and to exhibit that labor, and the body performing it, and as moral agents.

Almost a decade after Munson's last film was released, the Motion Picture Producers and Distributors of America adopted a strict Production Code, intended to contain film content, especially in regard to sex, but also crime and violence, and banning depictions of interracial relationships, drug use, and disrespect for religion. The MPPDA began to enforce the code only in 1934, under pressure from the Catholic Legion of Decency. In the meantime, artist's models appeared regularly as corrupting agents. In *Inspiration* (1931), artist's model Yvonne Valbert (Greta Garbo) is a languid seductress



who falls in love with a younger man. As the unworldly student begins to understand her past, he grows ambivalent. Brokenhearted, she returns to the security of a relationship with a former patron.⁷ Garbo remains throughout the film gowned and furred. She is seen in the studio only once, bare-armed and bizarrely costumed. Posing, she appears dazed, then bored; the sculptor gives her image a warrior stance and maniacal expression. Nudity is off-screen and in Yvonne's past, but its shadow renders love out of reach.

Elsewhere, the act of modeling corrupts the woman. In *The Song of Songs* (1933), Lily Czepanek (Marlene Dietrich) is an improbable country girl in dirndl and impossibly puffed sleeves, sent to Berlin to work in an aunt's bookshop after her father's death. Intrigued by a sculptor who comes by the shop, she agrees to pose for him and becomes his muse and his lover. When he balks at marriage, Lily weds his wealthy patron. Her first undressing, shot in teasing cuts that jump from face to feet, marks her exit from an innocent youth. Dietrich's bare torso is never seen, but the sculptor's studio fills with nude figures he creates in her image.⁸ Again, the moral censor stops the filmed image of body but passes the statue.

Between the body and the statue, a kind of alchemy takes place. The flesh-and-blood woman recedes as her image is painted on canvas, cast in bronze, carved in stone. The sculpted body, all surface, refuses the slippery slopes where the body turns inside out and outside in. Unresponsive, never a bead of sweat in dank heat nor gooseflesh in chill air. It is unremarkable, this humdrum act of dressing and undressing, in the midst of one's private daily routines, or in anticipation of a lover. Unremarkable, the same act, in the studio, the model disrobes, poses, and waits, while the artist studies her form, marking its contours in pencil or paint, pressing its shape into clay or chipping it into stone, leaving the body behind. But film that displays the model posing—or the actor posing as model—retains the memory of the body. On screen, it is a reminder of the living woman who stood before the camera, undressed, and posed. In *Purity*, Audrey Munson is present in her own image, dimpled ass and sweeping décolletage, self-aware and aspiring to an artistic act, a moral message. She's been looked at before. She leans forward, and so do I. But she is demure. She looks away. And then she is gone.

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Epilogue

My work has been compelled by figures that cannot be considered simply semiotic, simply representational.

—Donna Haraway. "... *We Have Never Been Human*," 2006

Another century turns. The struggle over control of the body and images of the body continues. Many decades after Munson last posed to be photographed, sculpted, or filmed, it is still the female body—and often the queer body—most frequently attacked. A list of cases could fill a volume of its own. In 2002, the statue *Spirit of Justice* by C. Paul Jennewein, displayed in the U.S. Department of Justice's Great Hall since 1936, was hidden behind heavy curtains so that the toga-clad figure, her right breast exposed,

would not appear behind the U.S. attorney general during news conferences. In 2004, a glimpse of breast, televised for less than a second, was condemned in complaints, a half million or more, to a federal agency. In 2006, a schoolteacher was suspended after taking a group of fifth-graders on a tour of the Dallas Museum of Art, passing nude figures: a Hellenistic funerary relief, and sculptures by Auguste Rodin and Aristide Maillol. Another body, another medium, another gesture, another revelation. Not the glimpse of breast or buttock: rather, what is revealed is the censor's vulnerable fear of the body, of desire, of the female subject it seeks to control by calling obscene, indecent, perverse.⁹ But the body—physical, erotic, defiant—remains.

We watch the film. A woman appears. She is working. She is creative. Her labor is productive. She steps down from the pedestal, turns her back, and robes. The film ends, but the woman does not disappear. My companion exhales, her breath rousing me as if from sleep. Shards of a dream linger.

ELIMINATIONS IN "PURITY"

Prologue.

Eliminate the close views where Miss Munson is shown with the front of her robe parted so as to expose her body.

Shorten the close up scene showing the Evil Spirit putting the thought of lust into the shepherd's mind. This scene should be cut at the point just before the shepherd's face changes, *eliminate the close view of the shepherd's face at the following*

Act 3.

Eliminate the enlarged close up view of the painting of the nude on the wall in the artist's studio.

In the scene where Purity is about to bathe in the brook, cut at the point where she starts to unbutton the back of her waist.

The scene where she is actually bathing should be a short glimpse of her on the rocks where she is throwing stones.

Act 4

Eliminate the prolonged view of Miss Munson in the nude upon the canvas where the artist visualizes his ideal while sitting in his studio. This should show a fade-in on the canvas of Miss Munson, followed by the artist contemplating it, which in turn is followed by the fade-out on the canvas of Miss Munson.

Eliminate entirely the reproductions posed by Miss Munson of the *Polar Star* *Andromeda*.

Eliminate from the *Magdalen* the movement of the arm. In all of the reproductions that remain, there should simply be fade-in and an instant fade-out with no prolonged view of any one of them.

Acts 5, 6, and 7

Shorten all views of Miss Munson posing in the nude in the studio to flashes. Entirely eliminate all close up views. All scenes where Miss Munson is walking around the studio in the nude are to be eliminated.

In the scene where Luston Black discovers Purity it should appear as if he had happened into the studio at the moment she was putting on her robe. This may be achieved by the elimination of the short flash of Miss Munson in the nude where she is posing.

Act 6

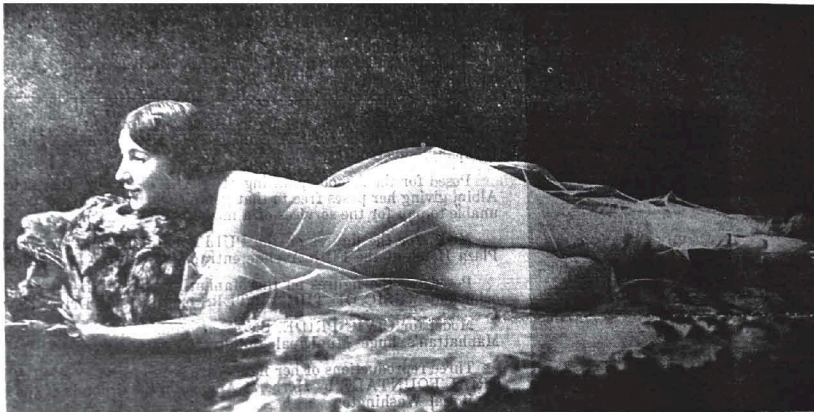
The note which Judith Lure writes to the artist regarding the garden party should read: "I am giving a garden fete Wednesday at ten and must provide some novel bit of entertainment" etc., thus eliminating the phrase "piquant bit of entertainment."

During the action at the garden party the view of Luston Black where the sensual expression creeps into his face should be eliminated.

The views of the reproductions of statues should be cut like the views of the reproductions of paintings, that is, there should be a fade-in followed by an instant fade-out.

Endnotes

1. See Tom Gunning, "Now You See It, Now You Don't": The Temporality of the Cinema of Attractions," in *Silent Cinema*, ed. Richard Abel (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1996), 71–84.
2. National Board of Review of Motion Pictures Records, 1907–1971: Controversial Films, Box 106, file on Purity, New York Public Library, Manuscripts and Archives Division.
3. "'Purity' Projected," *The New York Times* (July 24, 1916): 7.
4. Some U.S. states, such as Massachusetts, continued to deny or grant theatrical licenses on moral grounds into the twentieth century. See John Wertheimer, "Mutual Film Reviewed: The Movies, Censorship, and Free Speech in Progressive America," *American Journal of Legal History* 37, no. 2 (1993): 158–89.
5. All quoted material in this paragraph in Garth Jowett, "A Capacity for Evil": The Supreme Court Mutual Decision," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 9, no. 1 (1989): 59–78.
6. Brief scenes of female nudity or partial nudity take place in *A Daughter of the Gods* (1916), starring Australian swimmer Annette Kellermann as Venus; in the Babylon segments of D. W. Griffith's historical epic *Intolerance* (1916); in an episode of the Western serial *The Purple Mask*, with Grace Cunard in a dual role as gangster Patricia Montez and the heroic Queen of the Apaches; and in Cecil B. DeMille's *The Woman That Time Forgot* (1917), about the Spanish conquest of the Aztecs, in which female attendants of Tezca, Montezuma's daughter, are shown bathing. *Ecstasy* introduced the unknown Hedy Lamarr, credited as Hedy Kiesler. These examples suggest that the bodies of foreign actresses and nonwhite characters (even when played by white performers) were displayed more readily than those of American studio players in white roles.
7. Based on the novel *Sapho* by Alphonse Daudet (1884), *Inspiration* excised hints of lesbianism in Yvonne's past and raised the age of her young lover from twenty-one to twenty-four, even though a male character older than Yvonne has a female lover not quite eighteen.
8. See also *Ladies of Leisure* (1930), starring Barbara Stanwyck as prostitute-turned-artist's model, and Joan Crawford's character, a stenographer and part-time model, in *Grand Hotel* (1932). The artist's model also appears as victim, as provocateur of vice, and as opportunist in *Dracula's Daughter* (1936), *Walk on the Wild Side* (1962), and *Art School Confidential* (2006).
9. On the cloaking of Justice during John Ashcroft's tenure, see "Curtains for Semi-Nude Statue," *BBC News* (January 29, 2002), at <http://news.bbc.co.uk>. Regarding the televised Janet Jackson and Justin Timberlake performance, see Notice of Apparent Liability for Forfeiture in the Matter of Complaints Against Various Television Licensees Concerning Their February 1, 2004, Broadcast of the Super Bowl XXXVIII; released September 22, 2004, at <http://www.fcc.gov/eb/broadcast/NAL.html>. See also Ralph Blumenthal, "Museum Field Trip Deemed Too Revealing," *The New York Times* (September 30, 2006): A9.



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