

## Where Are My Children? (1916)

Where Are My Children? is an anti-abortion silent film released in the United States on 16 April 1916. The film was directed by Lois Weber and Phillips Smalley and produced by Universal Film Manufacturing Company/Lois Weber Productions in Universal City, California. In the film, Weber tells a story of an attorney who wants to have children and raise a family, but his wife chooses to abort her pregnancies, fearing that having children will ruin her social activities. In the early 1900s, information about contraception was not freely available or legal to obtain. Physicians were allowed to distribute contraceptives only if the woman would be put in a life-threatening circumstance were she to get pregnant. In the film, Weber encourages contraceptives as a means of family planning, but advocates against abortions. Where Are My Children? is one of the first films to discuss birth control and family planning, and it is among the first to push against motion picture censorship of contraception and family planning in cinema.

The film Where Are My Children? is approximately 80 minutes long. Weber and Smalley wrote the film with help from silent film actors Lucy Payton and Franklin Hill. Weber produced the film during the beginning of the contraception movement in the US led by Margaret Sanger, a prominent birth control activist and educator in New York, New York. The contraceptive movement sought to enable greater access to information about family planning and contraception. Into the early 1900s, the US Comstock Act of 1873 made it illegal to distribute information about or objects for contraception. The law defined information about contraception as obscene, leading to many obscenity law suits against individuals who distributed information about contraception. Sanger helped lead a movement to oppose the Comstock laws and to increase access to information and methods of birth control.

In the early 1900s, growth in popularity of the contraception movement and eugenics pushed concepts of race suicide and the importance of motherhood on women and US families. Eugenics promoted the selective reproduction of those with desirable physical and social traits and restriction of reproduction of those with undesirable traits. Race suicide was a concept that those with supposedly superior traits would use contraceptives as a means to discourage reproduction, leading to the idea that the white race would become obsolete. During that time, scholars and philosophers helped develop those concepts.

At the end of the 18th century, Thomas Malthus in Wotton, England, put forth ideas about predicting and the necessity of controlling population growth in the world. In the early 20th century, other philosophers like Herbert Spencer built upon Malthus's ideas and popularized the concept of Social Darwinism, arguing that both physical and social characteristics, such as deformities or criminal behavior, were hereditary, or passed down from parents to their children. Spencer's theories led to claims that those who possessed traits deemed as bad should not be allowed to reproduce. Social theorists like Spencer primarily blamed immigrant and poor families, as they were the people possessed what were considered undesirable traits. They also called for more public support for contraception to prevent further reproduction from poor and immigrant families. In contrast, reproduction of wealthy white families was encouraged, as eugenics held that their traits to be superior.

The film Where Are My Children? reflects the eugenic claims of the early 1900s. In the film, Weber argues for restricting impoverished families from producing more children and says that wealthy women who choose to not have children are selfish. Weber encourages wealthy women to produce healthy children, believing that they would improve society. Weber also discourages abortion, depicting the procedure as a type of race suicide. In comparison to poor and immigrant women, wealthy women had more accessibility to birth control, enabling them to control whether or not to

have children. Many wealthy women, most of whom were white, opted for contraception, leading to the fear that the white race would become obsolete in the future due to the fact that those women with desirable traits were not producing children.

The film begins with a written preface from Weber. She asserts the film's right to discuss contraception, disregarding active censorship regulations like the Comstock Act at the time. Though Weber recommends an adults-only audience, though she does not dissuade children from seeing the film, stating that it may do children good to watch.

In the first scene, Richard Walton is introduced as a district attorney who wants children. He is involved with an obscenity law suit, in which a physician has been distributing illegal contraception information to poor families. The physician advocates for birth control literature to promote the claim that wealthier families should have more children, as those children would have supposedly superior traits. Walton argues the case against the physician because the literature was considered obscene and inappropriate, violating the Comstock Act. The scene concludes with the court's decision to jail the physician for distributing illegal materials.

In the next scene, Walton returns home and sees his neighbor's three children playing outside. The film suggests that the sight saddens Walton, as he wants children, but the scene also implies that Walton wants children as a means to pass down his and his wife's supposedly superior physical and social traits. The film depicts Walton and his wife as an example of an ideal eugenic relationship because both are white and are upper class and thus have supposedly superior traits. His wife is depicted as a selfish woman because she does not want children, as they would disrupt her social life. In the following scene, Walton's sister-in-law visits the couple with her healthy child. The film introduces the child as the product of a eugenic relationship, from white, upper class parents. Despite her sister's visits with a healthy child, Walton's wife reinforces her sentiments about not wanting to have children by always engaging in social parties with her friends.

In those scenes, the film shows unwanted children from aborted pregnancies as angels in the sky with messages from Weber and her co-writers who advocate against the practice of abortion. The scenes are depicted with clouds, fanfare, and golden gates slowly opening, revealing unwanted children. The unwanted children appear throughout the film to indicate that a woman is pregnant and plans to get an abortion.

The next scene shows Walton's wife after she becomes pregnant. When Walton's wife is aware of her pregnancy, the presence of an unwanted child flies down from the sky and appears faintly besides her. Based on her socialite friends' suggestions, she visits the physician Herman Malfit to abort the unintended pregnancy.

In the middle part of the film, two visitors surprise the Waltons: Mrs. Walton's younger brother and the daughter of the Waltons' maid's. The brother seduces the maid's daughter and becomes pregnant. In the meantime, Walton's wife is busy socializing with her friends, and she becomes pregnant again but schedules another abortion. At the same time, her brother finds out about the maid's daughter's pregnancy and convinces her to abort the pregnancy. With the help of Walton's wife, who recommends the physician Malfit, the maid's daughter aborts her unwanted pregnancy. However, unlike in the case of Walton wife's, Malfit errs during the abortion procedure, and the maid's daughter dies from the complications. Before she dies, she confesses to her mother, the Waltons' maid, about her pregnancy.

In the next scene, Walton hears about the death of his maid's daughter and is angered by the news of the abortion. He physically confronts his wife's younger brother, who tells him who performed the abortion. In response, Walton brings Malfit to trial for performing an illegal abortion. In response, Malfit asks Walton's wife to persuade her husband to stop pursuing the case. He threatens to expose her abortions to her husband if she does not comply. Walton's wife tries to dissuade Walton, but he refuses to stop the trial. Throughout the trial, Walton's wife is shown socializing with her friends. At the trial, Malfit is not allowed to present evidence for his case, and he is sentenced to fifteen years in prison.

The film depicts Malfit as angered by his sentence, and in a fit of rage he shows his schedule book to Walton telling him to look at his own household. Walton looks into Malfit's papers and realizes

that he has no children because his wife aborted her multiple pregnancies. Walton comes home after the case and finds his wife engaged in a social party with her friends. He yells at her friends, declaring that he should bring them all to trial for being murderers and demands that everyone leaves. When her friends leave the house, Walton confronts his wife, asking her, "Where are my children?"

In the next scene, Walton is shown looking sadly at his neighbor's children, and as the film progresses, he eventually forgives his wife. The scene implies that Walton understands that his marriage is not a eugenic marriage, one where they would be able to pass down his and his wife's supposedly superior physical and social traits, and that he would never be able to raise a good family. Walton's wife, with a guilty conscience, prays for children. However, the film implies that because she had aborted her previous pregnancies, she could no longer become pregnant. The end of the film shows the couple sitting in front of a fireplace. In the scene, three imaginary unwanted children play in front of Walton. The scene then changes, showing that the unwanted children have grown and embrace Walton imaginatively. The film ends with the couple sitting alone in front of the fireplace with Walton's wife immersed in her guilty conscience.

In 1915 the US Supreme Court in Washington, D.C., denied motion pictures protection as free speech under the First Amendment, allowing for laws to enforce censorship regulations on motion pictures. The Supreme Court later overturned that ruling as well as the Comstock Act. During that time, many films were not allowed to show scenes of graphic nature, especially scenes of a surgical or sexual nature. According to historian Louise Heck-Rabi, Weber depicted concepts, which could have been interpreted as obscene, in the film *Where Are My Children?* through religious, allegorical references, influenced by her religious upbringing as a child. By constructing abortion and contraception as moral abstract actions, instead of physical actions, Weber worked around most of the censorship regulations.

Universal released *Where Are My Children?* in 1916 for a limited audience at New York's Globe Theater in New York, New York. The film was well-received, and the National Board of Review reconsidered the release of the film, allowing for the film to be shown for a wider audience. Despite the controversial bans, *Where Are My Children?* grossed three million dollars and was widely viewed in the United States.

## Sources

1. Bean, Jennifer, and Diane Negra, eds. *A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2002
2. The Comstock Act of 1873, Statutes at Large, 42nd Congress, 3rd Session, 598. <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=llsl&fileName=017/llsl017.db&recNum=639> (Accessed July 28, 2016).
3. Foster, Gwendolyn. *Women Film Directors: An International Bio-critical Dictionary*. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1995.
4. Heck-Rabi, Louise. *Women Filmmakers: A Critical Reception*. Metuchen: The Scarecrow Press, 1984.
5. Kevles, Daniel. "Eugenics and Human Rights." *British Medical Journal* 319 (1999): 435-8. <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1127045/> (Accessed July 11, 2016).
6. King, Miriam, and Steven Ruggles. "American Immigration, Fertility, and Race Suicide at the Turn of the Century." *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 3 (1990): 347-69.
7. Lederer, Susan. "Repellent Subjects: Hollywood Censorship and Surgical Imagines in the 1930s." *Literature and Medicine* 17 (1998): 91-113.
8. MacGibbon, Heather. *The Abortion Narrative in American Film: 1900-2000*. PhD diss., New York University, 2007.
9. Malthus, Thomas. *An Essay on the Principle of Population*. London: J. Johnson, 1798.
10. *Mutual Film Corp v. Industrial Commission of Ohio*. 236 U.S. 230 (1915).
11. Spencer, Herbert. *First principles*. Vol. 1. Williams & Norgate, 1904.
12. *United States v. Comstock*. 560 U.S. 126 (2010).
13. Unterberger, Amy, ed. *Women Filmmakers & Their Films*. Detroit: St. James Press, 1998.

14. Where Are My Children? Directed by Phillips Smalley and Lois Weber. Universal Film Manufacturing Company/Lois Weber Productions, 1916. Edited version: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HwrkAyH0-8A> (Accessed July 11, 2016).