Enforcing Heterosexuality: Adapting Lillian Hellman's 'The Children's Hour' for the screen

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SUMMARY: The Motion Picture Production Code of 1930 banned homosexuality from the screen. This paper uses two films as a case study of the Code's impact on Hollywood's depiction of homosexuality. Both These Three (1936) and The Children's Hour (1961) were adaptations of Lillian Hellman's play in which two single female teachers have their lives ruined by a lie that the women were lesbians. With the first the Code's impact was pervasive. The PCA dictated that the accusations of lesbianism be omitted. By the 1960s, the PCA was relaxing its ban so a film could be made that retained the play's lesbian content. This paper argues that the Production Code was Hollywood's means of enforcing heterosexuality and that, even in the era when the Code's influence was waning, the necessity of maintaining heterosexuality as society's norm still governed how movies (mis)represented the lives of queer people.

The Motion Picture Production Code of 1930 was Hollywood's effort at self-censorship. Its purpose was to forestall governmental attempts to control the content of movies. Ineffective and largely ignored in its first few years of existence, the Code grew teeth when film producers hired Joseph Breen in 1934 to head the Production Code Administration (PCA). The Code had an elaborate justification for its restrictions and contained detailed descriptions of what was and was not appropriate content for movies. It also prescribed the suitable methods for the depiction of adult topics. One terse sentence banned homosexuality from the screen: "SEX PERVERSION or any inference to it is forbidden."[1] As Vito Russo demonstrated in The Celluloid Closet film makers, actors, and actresses found ways to slip past Breen and his office coded references to gay and lesbian issues (Vito Russo, 1987, 62-123, passim), but the PCA was effective in keeping direct and open portrayal of homosexuality out of Hollywood's movies, even when the film's source in a play or novel or history had queer content.

While many films could be used to illustrate the Code's impact on Hollywood's portrayal of homosexuality, two in particular provide the basis for a good case study. Both These Three (1936) and The Children's Hour (1961) were adaptations of Lillian Hellman's play, The Children's Hour. In the play, the two single female teachers have their lives ruined by the spiteful lies of a disgruntled student that the women were lesbians. Both film versions had adaptations by
Hellman and direction by William Wyler.

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